











# FAIRLY WON;

OR,

THE HEIRESS OF ENDERLEIGH.

A Story.

BY

H. S. E.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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# FAIRLY WON;

OR,

## THE HEIRESS OF ENDERLEIGH.



### CHAPTER I.

LUNCHEON had been over at Oakley Grange for about the space of half-an-hour. The party had not been a large one, but had consisted chiefly of the family from the Manor House, and a few neighbouring friends, who had joined them after the meet. The fox-hunting gentlemen had not yet returned, nor had they been expected to return.

From the moment she entered the house, Miss Vivian had found herself the object of pointed and almost oppressive attentions on the part of her host and hostess. Mrs. Armytage had evidently had her lesson

beforehand ; it seemed as if she could not do enough to welcome and distinguish the lady 'whom her son delighted to honour.' But the welcome was not quite a spontaneous one, and Edith did not altogether feel at ease in her presence.

Mrs. Armytage was a brisk, active little woman, of about fifty, with hair that had once been jet black, but was now streaked here and there with grey, and black, bead-like, restless eyes, which seemed to look you through and through. As the poor widow of an officer, she had been noted among all her acquaintance as a clever, managing woman, and a perfect model of economy ; but in her present sphere of life, at the head of a large establishment, and with an almost unlimited command of money at her disposal, her talents were not altogether appreciated by her servants and dependants. Those roving black eyes had a knack of appearing to watch every one and every way at once. Even now, though on hospitable thoughts intent, Edith surprised them

several times, fixed upon her with a peculiar sort of expression, half inquisitive, half defiant; an expression which seemed to say, that power had been, and was still very sweet to her, and that she had no mind, much as she loved her only son, to resign her sovereignty without a struggle to another.

Our young lady smiled a funny little smile to herself as she read that look, while she mentally registered a vow, that as far as she was concerned Mrs. Armytage might wear the crown to the end of her days. Still it was not exactly pleasant to sit within such easy range of those stealthy glances, and as soon as lunch was fairly over, Edith made an excuse for rising from the table, by reminding Sir Ralph, who was sitting next to her, that he had promised to show her over the Oakley conservatories and gardens before they left.

This was going from bad to worse, however. "Better have borne the ills she had, than have flown to others that she knew not of." Better have remained and faced

‘the artillery’ of the lady’s eyes, which after all was comparatively innocuous, than have thrown open all the defences of her citadel, and left the besieging enemy to enter at his will.

Sir Ralph sprang up, only too delighted to obey her behest. They went out into the garden alone. Mary Neville looked and longed to go with them, and, to say the truth, Edith would gladly have had her companionship for this once, but Mrs. Armytage, mindful of the lesson she had been so carefully taught, found some excuse for detaining her at her side.

The young baronet led his beautiful visitor over some few acres of pleasure grounds, laid out in a style of which Paxton need not have been ashamed, and through several magnificent hothouses, which for the wealth of tropical plants they contained, might have rivalled the far famed conservatories of Kew. In the last of these—the nearest one however to the house—towards which they were about to return, they suddenly came to a full stop.

Then *something* was said or done, (Edith never knew exactly what,) some chance spark was applied to the smouldering fire which for days past had been ready to burst into a flame, and before she had time to check him, or to realize what he was about to do, she found Sir Ralph was in the middle of making her an offer. They were standing together face to face under one of the beautiful fan palms, which Eliot Warburton tells us grow in such graceful profusion on the banks of the Upper Nile; and from that day forth, Edith Vivian never saw a fan palm-tree without recalling to mind, with a sharp pang of self-reproach, that scene in the Oakley conservatory, and Ralph Armytage as he stood before her telling his tale of love. Boylike he had seized her hand, and held it clasped in both his own, while he pleaded his cause in language which was eloquent from the very force of its earnestness. His whole heart was in the matter; his life's happiness (as he thought) at stake. And yet he had, as it

seemed, but little fear of failure. Why should he fear? He had youth and good looks, rank and almost untold wealth upon his side. What more could a woman want? His suit had in it every element of success. Only he had overlooked one fact, and that perhaps the most important of all. The woman whom he loved, had no love to give him in return.

But though he had so little doubt of ultimate success, something he saw in the set expression of Edith's face made him tremble for what her first words might be. And so he went on talking rapidly and nervously, scarcely allowing her the opportunity to speak the answer which he was yet longing to hear.

All this excitement on his part, however, gave his companion time to recover the self-possession which she had lost at the first moment. Certainly Sir Ralph's proposal had taken her by surprise. Some subtle instinct told her that she ought to have been safe from such an acknowledg-

ment of his love, so long as she was a guest in his own house, but he, it seemed, was not quite enough of a gentleman at heart to feel this. Moreover, this was the first *boná fide* offer of marriage Miss Vivian had ever received, and even when the heart is not concerned, I pity the woman who can stand by while a man asks her to be his wife, without feeling her pulses quicken and her limbs tremble as they rarely do at any other time. But in Edith's case there was no outward sign of the agitation which was at work within. Her cheek might have grown a shade paler even than it usually was, but when the time came at last for her to speak, her voice never once faltered. She gave him his answer in words which were as kind and considerate as she could make them, but which left no manner of doubt upon his mind that she intended to reject him. It was an unequivocal refusal. Nothing remained for him to build on in the future, for in a few courteous sentences she had contrived to annihilate his every hope.

For a few moments he seemed almost stunned ; he had not prepared himself in the least for such an utter rejection, and the certainty, now that it had come upon him, was hard to believe in at first. Then his face grew crimson with nervous excitement, and he burst forth into passionate reproachful pleadings.

“ Miss Vivian, you cannot mean it, you cannot be so cruel. And I have loved you, oh so dearly, ever since the first time we met. And I thought,—”

But what he thought he never said. Boy as he was, he had too much of chivalrous feeling to reproach her in words for the shameless encouragement she had held out to him. But Edith knew only too well what he meant to say.

His forbearance troubled her more than all that had gone before. She looked up into his face, and then for the first time she began to understand the reality and the nature of the sorrow she had caused.

She had done this wrong thing with her

eyes open, knowing it to be wrong all the time, and now she was earning her just reward.

“Am I cruel, because I tell you the truth, Sir Ralph?” she said, in a lower softer tone. “Is it not better to know it at once, than to go on being deceived, even if you have been deceived before?”

“But if you only knew how I love you,” the young fellow went on; “if you would only try to believe it.”

“I do believe it, Sir Ralph, though I have tried not to do so till now, but you must believe me also when I say that it cannot be.”

“But why not, Edith?—let me call you Edith, just this once;—tell me why you cannot be my wife.”

“For many reasons,” Edith answered, while a faint blush stole over her cheek. “I am older than you for one, and your wife should be younger.”

“How much older?” he exclaimed, impetuously; “a few months at the most, I

shall be of age in a week or two, and you are not twenty-two yet, I know. What difference can a few months make?"

"But little perhaps in reality, but it makes years of difference in feeling. I shall be an old woman when you are still quite young," she added, trying to speak more lightly.

But he would not let her off so easily.

"It would make no difference at all if we loved each other. Edith, dear Edith, if you would only say that you love me."

"But I cannot say it, Sir Ralph."

"You mean that you do not love me?"

"Not as you would wish."

"But you would in time. Look here, Edith, I love you with my whole heart and soul, I would be very good to you, I would, indeed. There is nothing I would not do to please you. You could not help loving me a little in the end."

Edith shook her head very sadly. "It cannot be, Sir Ralph," she said.

Then he turned away his head from her,

and she knew that the iron had entered into his soul.

Never in her whole life had she felt so thoroughly ashamed of herself, as she did at that moment. She literally hated herself for the cruel part she had played. If by the sacrifice of aught dear to her, even as a right hand, or a right eye, she could have atoned in any way for the past, I believe she would have made the sacrifice then and there.

But it was too late; the evil was done, and was past her power to remedy. She would have given a great deal to have been spared the sight of his disappointment, but the one thing he had asked for was not hers to give.

She heard the sound as of a stifled sob, and though he had covered his eyes with his hands, she could see that the big tears were falling like rain through his clasped fingers.

With an impulse of pity which was simply irresistible, she laid her hand upon his arm

and said, in a voice which sounded like music itself in his ears, partly because it gave him a renewed feeling of hope : “ It make my very heart ache to see you so unhappy, Ralph. I, too, will call you so for this once. Try to forgive me, and to forget all this that has passed between us now. I cannot give you the love you ask for, but I will love you as a sister, if you will let me. I have no brother, and you no sister ; let us be to each other as brother and sister from this time forth. Let us be friends at least. Come and see me at my own home if you will, and the time will come—not so many years hence, I hope—when, looking at me, you will wonder you could ever have cared for such a sober, grey-haired old maid ; and looking at your own blooming wife, you will learn to bless me for what I have done to-day.”

“ Never ! ” exclaimed Sir Ralph, passionately, and turning towards her, he made no further effort to hide the tokens of his weakness. “ As long as I live I shall never feel

differently from what I do now, and until I hear that you are married to some other man, I will never cease to hope that some day your mind may change towards me. None of your brother and sister friendships for me. I don't love you like a brother, and I never shall. You ask me to come to Enderleigh, and so I will; but understand, every time I come, it will be to tell you the same old story, and to ask you over and over again to love me as my wife."

He stopped. Edith knew not how to answer him. Sorrow seemed in those few moments to have done for him the work of years. It was no longer a lovesick boy speaking to her, but a strong, earnest man, and she was frightened at his vehemence. She felt sick at heart, and began to be almost angry with this man who thus rejected her proffered friendship, and would take, as it seemed, no answer from her lips.

He had possessed himself of her hand again, and was holding it all this while in a grasp which gave her positive pain.

“Let go my hand, Sir Ralph, if you please,” she said at last, a little haughtily; “you are hurting me, you are indeed.”

And as she spoke, she heard the handle of a door turned, and she knew that some one was coming into the conservatory.

“Let go my hand !” Edith repeated in a louder tone.

She might as well have spoken to the winds. Either he had not heard the sound of the opening door, or else he was in a desperate mood, and cared not who might come in and surprise them thus.

“As my wife, Edith,” he repeated, looking steadily into her eyes; “you understand, as my wife.” And then, before she had dreamed of what he was about to do, he had raised her hand to his lips, and was covering it with passionate kisses.

Edith dragged her hand indignantly away, and pushing past him, tried to make her escape. But she was too late, and, moreover, she chose the wrong door of exit. Turning towards the one on the side of the

conservatory nearest to the house, she all but ran into the arms of some one who had just entered from that direction, and looking up she met the astonished gaze of Harry Neville. He looked hot and tired, and very muddy, and he was carrying a fox's brush in his hand. For a moment Edith stood speechless with confusion and mortification. She had not a doubt in the world but that her cousin must have heard Ralph Armytage's last words, and seen those stolen kisses; and there could be but one interpretation he was likely to put upon them.

Startled as he evidently was, he was nevertheless the first to speak.

"I beg your pardon if I have interrupted you," he said stiffly. "They told me I should find you here, and I did not know you were engaged. I've brought you the fox's brush you asked me for; but it's no matter, you shall have it some other time."

So saying, and without giving her time for a word in answer, he turned on his heel, and retraced his steps towards the house.

As the door closed upon him, Edith burst into tears. Her nerves had been wrought up to a high pitch of excitement before his entrance, and now this last *contretemps* was more than she could bear.

But oh, Ralph, Ralph, you foolish boy, those tears were never shed for you !

Of course he thought they were, and chose to imagine that she had changed her mind, and was beginning to look with a more favourable eye upon himself and his broad acres. He had been so absorbed in his own thoughts that I much question if he had ever seen Captain Neville, or heard him speaking. At any rate, he drew nearer to Edith again, and bending over her, began once more to plead his cause with all the eloquence of which he was capable.

Not long was he allowed to go on in this strain. Those audacious kisses had hardened Edith's heart towards him, and she was no longer in a mood to make much allowance for his feelings.

She choked back her sobs as best she

could, and raising her head, flashed at him out of her tearful eyes a look which silenced him at once; and gathering up the skirt of her riding-habit, she haughtily desired him to take her back to the house.

He obeyed without another word, and managed to look tolerably crest-fallen during the short progress.

They found that Captain Neville had just ridden off in solitary grandeur (or dudgeon, as the case might be), on his road back to Haughton, and Fanny Price, when they went in, was in the act of begging and imploring for leave to stay where she was till the following Monday, as Mrs. Armytage had invited her to do.

The leave was not refused, and then Edith the strong and active; Edith the proud, who had never confessed to feeling really tired in her life; Edith, who had ridden nearly thirty miles one morning, and danced and run races for hours at her school children's treat on the same evening,—this same Edith now declared herself to be quite

knocked up with her ride of about six miles, and said she should wish to take little Fanny's place, and drive home, all dressed for riding as she was, in her uncle's carriage. So poor pretty Queen Mab was led back, none too willingly, to her stable, her work over for that day. And Queen Mab's master, as soon as the Haughton carriage had driven off, without waiting to bid adieu to his other guests, without daring to face his mother's inquiring eyes, sprang on to the Black Dwarf's back, and driving the spurs ruthlessly into the poor horse's quivering flesh, the two went away together at a mad gallop over the desolate moors, dashing headlong through the woods, and across the waters that lay in their path, and never came back to Oakley Grange till the Great Bear was shining high and clear in the wintry sky, and the deep-toned clock in the old Gothic tower was striking ten.

## CHAPTER II.

IF Sir Ralph Armytage had been ten years older, the chances are that he would have behaved very differently. In this case he would probably have returned to the dining-room after his fair guest had driven away, poured out half a tumbler of champagne, and drank it off, while he talked and laughed a little louder than usual with his other friends over the *débris* of the luncheon-table; met his mother's questioning gaze with a look of studied indifference, or perhaps, when they were alone together, told her the truth in half a dozen words. Then very likely he would have strolled out into the woods in company with his cigar-case, kicked about some of the loose timber some-

what savagely, and come back again in the gloaming in good time to dress for dinner ; talked with his mother much as usual during that meal, and taken an extra glass or two of claret afterwards ; strolled into the drawing-room an hour later, read the paper upside down till it was time for prayers, and sought his bed at last to spend a night of restless misery ; or, if kind fate were propitious to him,

“ To sleep, perchance to dream.”

Under these circumstances, it is *just possible* that he might have succeeded in baffling the curiosity of some of the eager watchers around him. But as it was, every man, woman, and child, both at Haughton and at Oakley, was perfectly aware of what had happened, namely, that Sir Ralph had made his offer to Miss Vivian in the conservatory, after lunch, and had been refused.

Poor young fellow ! it was rather hard upon him that he should not be allowed to swallow his bitter pill in private. One does not care to have a large audience when in

the dentist's torture chamber, and while one's biggest molar tooth is in the grasp of his merciless forceps.

But in this case the rejected one was so deeply engrossed by his all-absorbing sorrow, which was genuine enough while it lasted, that he cared but little for the smaller smartings caused by the chattering of other people's tongues.

It was curious however to note the contrast of feeling produced by this knowledge in the dwellers at the two different houses.

At Oakley, the mental barometer fell swiftly and suddenly. At Haughton it rose in proportion—with one exception—Harry Neville's state continued at stormy. It might have been supposed by a looker on, that he had reason to congratulate himself upon the turn matters had taken, but he did not seem to think so. He became more reserved and self-contained than ever; showed himself only at meal-times, and then pleaded an obstinate headache as an excuse for not joining much in general conversation; re-

maining unmoved alike by sisterly sympathy or parental raillery. Minnie, like a foolish little bird as she was, made matters worse by carolling about the house in a most absurd way for the next two or three days, and would have embraced her brother *avec effusion*, every time she met him on the stairs, or in the passages, only that he declined the honour once for all with thanks. The meet took place on a Thursday. On the Saturday after, Captain Neville shut himself up in his own room for nearly the whole day, on pretence of having Indian letters to write ; but as the mail was not to leave till the middle of the next week, he need not have been in quite such a hurry, as Minnie sagely observed.

I don't believe for my part that he wrote a single letter during those long hours that he spent alone in that somewhat untidy, and alas ! smoke-impregnated, upper chamber. Tom Arlington of the 177th, and little Willie Brooke of the artillery, who had actually cried when Harry came away

from India, might look in vain for his well-known handwriting when the contents of the post bag were carried into the mess-room at Meerut, about a month later, for he wrote never a line to either of them that day. He did not write because he could not, but he did something better. He fought a great battle, single handed, (save for the help of One above,) against his own ill-temper and *weakness*, as he would have called it, and came off victorious at last, after a hard struggle. Before he went down ready dressed for church on the following Sunday, he stood for full five minutes looking intently at Edith's little sketch of the Drachenfels, as it hung in its old place over the mantelpiece, then he took it down, and with its glass all broken as it still was, thrust it away out of sight into a drawer among a hundred other things, and turned the key sharply upon it, as if by doing so he could shut out for ever from his memory the thoughts which that sketch was wont to conjure up. "What was temptation sent

to us for if not be resisted ?” He gave one great sigh it is true, as he performed this heroic piece of self denial ; but all the same, the storm clouds seemed then and there to pass away, and by the time he went into the breakfast room there was sunshine on his face and in his heart again.

And Edith, the chief cause of all this mischief, the prime mover in the little drama that had been enacted, how was she feeling all this time ? For the first few hours after the *dénouement* had taken place, it was an impossibility for her to help feeling a certain sense of relief, almost amounting to satisfaction. The danger she had been dreading for a whole week past, and which, to say the truth, she had so rashly courted, had been met and passed. Not that she had come out of it scatheless. Her punishment, richly as it was deserved, had come upon her ; but anything was better than that previous suspense. She had shown herself duly penitent she thought, and now that little affair was disposed of

for good and all, and she felt herself more free than before, to enjoy the society of her uncle and cousins.

The 'affair,' as she was thus pleased to call it, had not been successful either in itself or in its results, and it was best therefore to dismiss it as much as possible from her mind. But as time went on, she found this was easier said than done. She had been sorely humiliated. For the first time in her life since she could remember, (for we will allow that in that other little 'affair' on the Rhine she had been to a certain extent the victim of circumstances,) she had wilfully forfeited her own self-respect; and yet she chose to be surprised now, to find that she could not regain her usual composure and elasticity of spirits. It was not easy, it was not even possible to forget what had happened. Do what she would, she could not drive away from before her eyes the remembrance of Ralph Armytage's tears, or shut out from her ears the sound of his imploring reproachful voice. "You cannot mean to be

so cruel," the poor boy had said, and she kept on repeating those words to herself, over and over again, till they almost drove her mad. They haunted her as she sat talking with the others in the evenings, trying to laugh and to seem gay ; they haunted her worse still through the wakeful hours of the nights that followed.

This sort of thing went on the whole of Saturday, while Harry was supposed to be writing his Indian letters. A long walk might have done her good, but Mary Neville managed to take cold at the meet, and Mrs. Price was gone for the day into Bristol, on a shopping expedition. There was no one to walk with her, so she went for a duty drive with her uncle instead, and the effort to entertain him did her good in the end, though it was pain and grief to her to have to sit by his side for two hours in the close chariot, and pretend to feel interested in everything that he talked about. That night however, tired out as she was in mind and body, she contrived to sleep, and

thanks to nature's sweet restorer, she awoke on the Sunday morning in a better frame of mind; and to the consciousness that life might yet have something more of brightness in store for her. Not that she felt any less sorrow on the score of her late misdoings. On the contrary, her sense of penitence only deepened as she realized more calmly the deception and the heartlessness of which she had been guilty; but the restless excitement which had oppressed her for so many days was gone. She was repentant now, rather than remorseful, and it was a comfort in her present mood to feel that church time was so near, longing as she was to confess the burden of her sin and sorrow in the house of God, and to hear God's message of pardon spoken to her troubled spirit.

It was not to be, however; at least the comfort and peace of mind which she had looked forward to, as certain of attainment in that hour of prayer, were in part denied to her. Edith rose up from her knees when

the opening prayers of our Liturgy were ended, after having made confession out of a full heart that she had indeed “done those things that she ought not to have done,” to find that Ralph Armytage was sitting almost exactly opposite to her, his eyes fixed with a stony stare upon her face.

## CHAPTER III.

THE Neville family occupied a large square pew in the chancel of the old church at Haughton, and knowing this, the young baronet had ensconced himself behind a pillar in a corner pew of one of the galleries, where, partly screened from observation by a large bunch of christmas decorations, he could see down the whole length of the chancel, without much risk of being seen. It so happened that Edith was the only member of the party sitting on the side of the pew which faced this gallery, and it is possible therefore, that no one besides herself was conscious of his presence; indeed after that first long look, the poor young fellow kept himself almost entirely con-

cealed even from her view. But she had seen him once and that was enough. The sight of his white sorrowful face, and of his haggard eyes, so heavy and bloodshot, was not likely to be forgotten in a hurry. If ever a man's face expressed utter helpless despair, Ralph Armytage's did that day. To Edith it seemed that those staring, wide-open eyes, could never have been closed in sleep since she had seen him last (as indeed they scarcely had), and she felt that in her turn there would be no rest for her that night.

She could no longer see him, but she knew by instinct that he was still watching her from behind that projecting pillar, and yet impelled by a fascination which was irresistible, her own eyes kept wandering every few minutes towards the spot where he was sitting. Not that she felt in the least more in love with him than she had done three days before, only she was so intensely sorry for the mischief she had caused. No doubt Harry Neville, who was sitting opposite to her, observed those fur-

tive glances, and it is just possible he might have guessed at their cause. He had seen Edith change colour when she had first caught sight of her broken-hearted lover, and when she sat down a few minutes after, he almost thought she was going to faint; but he took no notice of it, except by lifting up the large double smelling bottle, which was lying idly on Mrs. Price's lap, and putting it quietly within his cousin's reach.

She thanked him by a slight inclination of the head, but did not venture to look up in his face. She had no thought of fainting indeed; but her tears were just ready to burst forth, and there was a choking sensation in her throat, which warned her that it would need all her power of self-control to prevent them from overflowing. And there she had to sit through the remainder of the service, perfectly conscious that not only one but two pair of eyes were stealthily watching her every movement, and to keep her own eyes and thoughts from wandering as best she could. The sermon did not help

her much. It was little more than an elaborate essay, by a very young High Church curate, on the minor fasts and festivals of the Christian year, setting forth (as the author of 'A Son of the Soil' has so ingeniously put it), the great advantages to be derived from the contemplation of the fact, that it was the second Sunday after Epiphany. There was a good deal in it about the Church, but not much about the Gospel; a good deal about the Epiphany, but not much about the Saviour, whom the wise men from the east came to worship; quotation upon quotation from Keble and the fathers, but scarcely a word from the Bible. The language was good throughout, but it carried little meaning with it; it was the husk without the kernel; the letter without the spirit; the golden setting without the pearl of great price, whose beauty it should have set forth and enhanced. Edith did her best to listen to this 'vealy' display of rhetoric and erudition, but it was very uphill work in her present mood; she could

not help feeling weary and almost impatient for the service to be over. Once she looked up and saw Harry's eyes fixed upon her with an expression of genuine pity. He knew at any rate how thoroughly she would have enjoyed a really good sermon even then, if she had had but a chance of listening to one.

It was some comfort to feel that he could sympathize with her, but it was better comfort still to find herself outside the church again at last, with the keen frosty air blowing upon her cheeks. Beyond reach, too, of those reproachful eyes, whose despairing gaze had haunted her up to the very moment she left the pew.

If Sir Ralph watched or followed her after that, he kept well out of sight. At least Edith did not see him, for she never looked to the right or left as she walked slowly out of the porch, and along the narrow path which led across the churchyard. As they emerged upon the high road, Harry Neville, who had been holding open the little wicket

gate while the others passed through in single file, let it swing to with a certain amount of noise, and coming up with his cousin, who happened to be the last of the party, asked her if she would take his arm. It was the first time he had done such a thing since she had been at Haughton. Edith was taken by surprise, and for a moment her haughty pride tempted her to decline the tardy civility. But she felt very sad at heart and lonely just then. The old words, "take my arm, won't you," had a familiar sound, which was not without its fascination, and though she had no actual need of the support, the kindness was very welcome, so without saying a word she laid her hand upon his offered arm, and leaned upon it rather more heavily than she might have done at any other time. And after that he *was* very kind to her. He took possession of her large prayer book, and laughed at her for carrying about such a portmanteau, as he called it.

"Mamma gave it to me just before she

died," Edith answered simply, "and I have seldom used any other since."

"It is the very same you had at Bonn last year, I do believe," he added, with a side glance at his companion, which she did not choose to meet.

"The very same," she said, trying to speak carelessly, but scarcely able to repress a smile, as she thought how nearly that book had been the means of betraying her relationship to him on that occasion, and how horribly frightened she had been about it at the time.

Some such idea might have entered into his mind also; for as he walked along, quietly turning over the leaves of the book till he came to the fly-leaf where her name was written at full length, a smile of suppressed amusement quivered about his lips. But whatever his thoughts might have been he kept them to himself.

Just then Mr. Price and his wife—who were plodding on arm-in-arm at rather a slow pace in front of them—came to a full

stop to speak to some casual acquaintances whom Mrs. Price only seemed to know. The others waited for them for a few moments, Harry with ill-concealed impatience ; for it was bitterly cold, and a few light snow-flakes were just beginning to fall.

“This won’t do at all,” he muttered to Edith, stamping his feet to keep them warm. “When my sister Laura there begins a gossip, there’s no knowing when it will end. Are you coming on ?” he said, in a voice just loud enough for Mr. Price, whose face was turned towards them, to hear. He did not seem to hear, however ; and there was no sign that the conference was likely to break up just yet.

There was no one else to wait for, Minnie and her father having driven home from the church-door ; and very soon Harry’s small stock of patience came quite to an end.

“Look here, Tom,” he called out in a louder tone. “Edith and I are frozen through and through, and tired out into the bargain with Parson Pemberton’s learned

discourse, so we shall just walk on quickly over the fields to warm ourselves, and you two stout parties can follow at your own sweet pleasure."

Mr. Price gave a nod of assent to intimate that he understood, and then turned away his head to listen to something his wife was saying to him.

Then Harry drew his cousin's arm somewhat closer within his own, and the two started off at a quick pace on their homeward road. The rapid healthy exercise was about the best restorative Edith could have had. Her spirits rose perceptibly under its influence. The air was very keen, but bracing for any one in health. The snow was not much to speak of as yet, though there were signs in the sky which betokened a heavy fall before long. Altogether it was a day to enjoy a good walk, and Edith enjoyed this one so much that she was quite sorry when the Lodge gate at Haughton came in sight. Whether Captain Neville enjoyed it also is quite another affair; if he

did, it must have been much on the same principle that condemned criminals are sometimes reported to laugh and talk cheerfully the night before they are hung. A long season of exile and self-imposed penance was before him. He had made up his mind at last, to put himself out of the way of temptation once for all, as we shall see presently. So, perhaps, he thought that as this was the last piece of self-indulgence he meant to allow himself for some time to come, he might as well make the most of it.

He took up the thread of the conversation much at the same point where it had been interrupted. "That was a better sermon you and I heard at Bonn that day, than the one we've just been listening to, if I remember rightly. Poor old Pemberton ! he's as good-hearted a young fellow as ever lived, and works like a Trojan in the parish. Perhaps he may make a fair average preacher some day, if he would but learn to leave externals alone, and try

to get at people's hearts, but at present he is painfully prosy."

"The Bonn sermon did not altogether find favour in your eyes—or *ears*, I suppose I ought to say—at the time, though, *mon cousin*," said Edith, looking up at her companion with an arch look which he instantly returned in kind and with interest.

"Didn't it? Let me see, what was it about? I dare say you remember the whole thing from beginning to end,—text and all. Women always do. *Ladies*, I suppose I ought to say," he added, mimicking her own manner.

"Pray say women; as far as I am concerned I like the word far better. But you are giving me credit for a better memory than I deserve."

"Prove that," he exclaimed, suddenly stopping in his walk, and facing her. "Miss Vivian—Edith, what *is* your name to be? Tell me, on your honour, whether you don't remember the text of that sermon, and all the different heads that followed."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Edith, laughing. "To begin upon, as you are neither my godfather nor godmother I don't see what right you have to ask me what my name is, and to go on catechising me in such a fashion, keeping me standing here in the snow-storm, too, all the time." (This with a slight pout.)

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure. I forgot that it was snowing. But about that sermon. Please, do indulge my curiosity. For once in a way I have set my heart upon your telling me that text."

"For once in a way then you will have to be disappointed," said Edith, with a certain spice of obstinacy in her manner. "I have no intention of indulging your curiosity as you call it, when I firmly believe that you remember as much about it as I do myself."

"*'La reine ne le veut pas.'* So be it, then," said Harry, laughing and shrugging his shoulders. "I suppose there is no appeal from that august decision. Well, I

must confess to recollecting more about that sermon than I do of many that I hear. It made a great impression upon me at the time ; or perhaps it was the talk we had about it afterwards that helped to fix it on my mind. By the bye, Edith," he exclaimed (and he was just going to make another full stop in the middle of the road, only she walked resolutely on), have you got over that most absurd crotchet of yours yet, which I remember we had a sort of quarrel about, that day ? Because if you haven't, though I'm neither your godfather nor god-mother, I shall feel inclined to give you a good scolding."

"What crotchet?" asked Edith, blushing a little, for she knew perfectly well what he meant.

"Why, that the good things of this life were only sent to us to be a delusion and a snare. *That* was the point on which I begged to differ from the good gentleman who preached. Don't you recollect ? He went on talking and telling us so much

about the dangers and temptations of wealth, that at last he made a certain fair cousin of mine feel almost wicked, just because she happened to be a rich woman."

Edith walked on silently. She did not seem to know how to answer him.

"Wasn't it so?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"There is no doubt about it, money *is* a painful responsibility," she murmured, under her breath, and with a sort of half sigh.

He heard the words and the sigh too.

"Parcel of nonsense!" he exclaimed, laughing, and drawing her hand a little closer within his arm. "At least, I don't mean that, exactly. Of course money is a responsibility, as all our talents are. But it was never meant to make us miserable, for all that. To have enough and to spare is a *blessing*; and when God sends us a blessing, it is our own fault if we choose to look upon it as a curse. Eh, Cousin Edith?"

Her head was bent down a little, so he had to look under her bonnet to see how she took this last observation.

All of a sudden, and perhaps in self-defence, she flashed out upon him, and carried the war into the enemy's own territory. "It's all very well for you to talk, Cousin Harry," she said, raising her eyes, and looking him full in the face, "but you see you are *not* a rich man. There is no rose but has its thorn, and if you could change places with me for a little while you would find out, perhaps, as I have done, that money has its drawbacks as well as everything else."

She had gone almost too far. By way of answer he gave her a look before which her own eyes fell much faster than they had risen.

"I wish to my heart I could change places with you, if *only* for a little while," he exclaimed, passionately, "though God knows I have no wish to murmur at the position in which He has placed me." He

had been taken off his guard, and for one moment had forgotten himself, but it was soon over. "Not that I should be likely to do half so much good with my money as you do," he went on, in a lighter tone ; "though I don't suppose you are always quite so reckless in your generosity as you were to a certain stout young person, name unknown, who brought you your breakfast at Königswinter, one fine morning last autumn." It was Edith's turn to look startled now.

"What *do* you mean? How in the world did you come to know anything about that?" she asked, blushing, poor girl ! up to the very roots of her hair.

"Well, let me see, did you tell me at the time? No, that I'm sure you didn't. I suppose it must have been the stout person herself, then, who rushed upon me with your gold pieces still in her hand, and gave me a breathless narrative of the whole transaction. Somebody must have told me, or how else could I have accounted for that

wonderful structure built up of marigolds and China-asters which the fat hand of gratitude pressed upon your acceptance, with her tears and blessings, as you stepped on board the steamer?"

"What a shame!" exclaimed Edith, laughing in spite of herself. "It's too bad of you to laugh at the poor girl like that. There were some sweet pretty roses in her bouquet, I recollect, considering the time of year."

"To be sure; so there were," replied Harry, meditatively. "I rather think one of them is in my possession at this present moment."

After that there was silence between them for about the space of three minutes, and then it was Harry who spoke again.

"You hit me hard just now, Edith, but you only spoke the truth when you said I was not a rich man. I always have been, and always shall be a poor one, I suppose. But I never knew what it was to feel poor till quite lately. I don't think I'm either

very greedy or avaricious by nature, but I'd give a good deal if somebody I don't know and don't care about, would die within the next week, and leave me a heap of money ; I know fast enough what I'd do with it. Such things do happen. Look at that fellow Ralph (Edith winced a little at the name), he went to bed one night, less than six months ago, without a penny to bless himself with, and woke up next morning to find himself heir to a baronetcy, and to something like forty thousand a year."

"You don't give your unknown benefactor too much time to think about it, certainly," said Edith, ignoring the latter part of his speech. "Why must you have this fortune within a week?"

"Because after that it will be too late. I shall be gone."

"Gone ! Where?"

"To the Crimea; and once there, you see, a Russian bullet might pick me off any day. You need not look so incredulous, my dear cousin. I am not joking. On the con-

trary, I never was more serious in my life. I told you the other day I had been thinking for some time past of volunteering for active service before Sebastopol, and now my mind is quite made up to do so without delay. Old Fitz's example has stirred up my patriotism, I suppose."

"Do you really think you are right in doing this?" Edith asked, without daring to lift her eyes from the ground.

"I *really* do think so," he answered, firmly. "Out there, I may be able to do some little good in my generation, instead of leading such an utterly useless, wasted existence as I am doing here; breaking the tenth commandment, too, every day of my life, by coveting my neighbour's house, and wife, and all manner of things that are his."

"Don't be irreverent, Harry," Edith pleaded, "that is not like you."

"I don't know about irreverence," he muttered, turning his head away. "It's the truth."

Bitterly as the words were spoken, Edith's

heart gave a great throb of joy as she listened to them. Who was the neighbour he was so sorely tempted to envy? Was he thinking of Ralph Armytage, and did he actually believe she would marry him after all?

“Does Uncle Edward know about this?” she asked presently.

“Not yet. Monday is proverbially a black day, so I thought I would break the news to him to-morrow morning. Poor old governor, he won’t like it at first. We shall have a bit of a tussle about it, I dare say, but he ought to know by this time that when my mind is once made up it is no light thing will turn me.”

“And when do you think of starting?” said Edith, feeling as if she were expected to say something more.

“Well, I should like to go by the ‘Himalaya,’ if I can get my kit ready in time, because the captain’s an old friend of mine. She’s to sail on the 25th, that’s Thursday week.”

“So soon.” Only that her voice sounded strained and unnatural, and that the hand which rested on her cousin’s arm trembled ever so little, no one would have guessed the effort that it cost Edith Vivian to say those words.

Oh, Harry, you idiot! you blind, deaf, senseless simpleton! To think that you could go on talking in that way about coveting and desiring other men’s goods, when all the time there was a priceless treasure within your reach which would have been yours, and yours only, if you would but have asked for it.”

By this time they had reached the lodge of the Manor House, and Captain Neville was holding open the gate for his companion to pass through.

“I don’t fancy we shall have time or opportunity for another talk on this subject before I go,” he said, looking into her eyes as she walked past him. “So, suppose we say good bye to each other, as it were, now. We haven’t known each other so very long,

but we have been very good friends on the whole, have we not? I should like to think that you won't forget me quite while I'm away, Edith."

"I don't suppose I shall forget you quite, cousin Harry," Edith replied, with a curious little sickly smile, something like a gleam of sunshine on a dreary winter's day.

"That's right. I should like to think, if I have to bivouac sometimes out there at night in the snow, 'with my face to the stars,' as Mr. Froude would say, that you and Minnie have remembered me in your prayers before you turned into your comfortable berths at home."

"Very well. I'll try to remember," she said, still with the same wintry smile. "And you know you gave me credit just now for having a good memory."

"And so you have, I believe. But mine is a very treacherous one, and I must have something of yours to take with me for a keepsake. See, I mean to help myself," he added, repossessing himself of her hand, which she

had removed from his arm when they came to the gate, and proceeding deliberately to unbutton the delicate grey glove in which it was encased. "In old times people used to fight mock battles, with a lady's glove for the prize, and I fancy this one might keep me from disgracing myself out yonder if ever I felt inclined to do so. What a *little* hand it is," he added, almost in a whisper, still holding her cold, trembling fingers imprisoned in his own warm clasp, while they stood together before the hall-door, waiting for it to be opened. "I will bring you some Circassian gloves when I come home, if I ever do come home again, Edith."

He looked down at the 'little hand' for a moment or two, with longing, loving eyes; and then, with an impulse which was simply irresistible, lifted it to his lips, and kissed it tenderly and reverently, as he would have kissed the hand of an empress.

And Edith never once offered to rebuke him, though all this while they heard the fat old butler fumbling away at the locks

and bolts on the other side of the door preparatory to opening it. He threw it wide open with great state directly after, and they went in together ; and then, while her companion lingered for a moment to divest himself of his hat and coat, Edith walked across the hall to the dining-room, where her uncle was waiting lunch for them, feeling very much, indeed, as if she were walking in her sleep.

## CHAPTER IV.

THAT Sunday was destined to be no day of rest for our heroine. Poor girl, her troubles were not over even yet ; for when she went up to her own room after luncheon, with her mind so full of the news which her cousin had just imparted to her, that she had almost forgotten the very existence of such a person as Ralph Armytage, she was instantly reminded of him by seeing a letter lying on her dressing-table, addressed to her in his peculiar and somewhat illegible handwriting. She walked straight up to the table, and taking up the letter, tore it open almost angrily ; then looked round the instant after to make sure that Susan was nowhere in the room.

This man was becoming a sort of thorn in her side ; she was to have no peace or rest because of him, it seemed. Why could he not have been content to abide by the answer she had given him, instead of thus making his own defeat and her misconduct patent to all the world ? She had tried to keep his secret for him ; one would have thought that he would have done his best to keep it too.

In such a mood as this it was not likely that poor Ralph's somewhat rhapsodical epistle would meet with very merciful treatment at her hands. It contained little more than a repetition of what he had said three days before. He urged the same arguments to induce her to relent in what he called her cruelty towards him, and swore the same vows of eternal fidelity and celibacy for her sake. Nothing could ever alter his feelings of affection for her, and again and again he implored her to reconsider her decision. The letter would be taken to the Manor House while he was at church, he said ;

he meant to go to both services at Haughton Church, so that he should see her at least, if he might not speak to her; and if she had any heart at all, she could not refuse to give him one kind look. Did she know how miserable he was? He wound up by saying that it was his intention to call at Haughton early on the following morning, and he entreated her to grant him an interview; as not until he had learned again from her own lips that her decision was irrevocable, would he believe that his suit was hopeless.

It was not wonderful, perhaps, that Miss Vivian felt herself in no slight degree injured and aggrieved when she had finished reading this letter through. She had given him his answer once, and had made it as plain as words could make it. It was too bad, if she should have to go through such a painful, humiliating process all over again. This was simply a persecution, and she said to herself that she "did well to be angry."

Poor Edith and poor Ralph; both were to

be pitied, but she was the most to blame. She had brought all the evil upon herself by her own will and deed, and now she seemed to think it hard that she must abide by the consequences. And yet I think we may forgive her if for once she did experience a certain genuine feeling of satisfaction, when upon looking out of the window a few minutes afterwards, she discovered that it was then snowing so heavily as to make it quite out of the question for any lady to walk more than a mile to the afternoon service at Haughton.

It was not Miss Vivian's habit to spend her Sundays in reading or writing letters, but on the afternoon of which we are speaking she did devote about the space of half an hour to the work of answering the one she had just received. It was a harder task than she would have believed possible, though the words she used were few and simple enough. They were kind words, too, though very much to the purpose ; for, before she had written above a line or two, her anger against this

man had almost faded out, and she could only think of his white sorrowful face as she had seen it that morning, and picture to herself the blank look of disappointment which would come over it when he caught sight of the empty pew in the chancel, if he did go to Haughton church again that afternoon. She entreated him, for both their sakes, to accept the answer she had already given him as final, and not to pain himself and her by seeking another interview on the following day. She repeated many things she had said three days before in the Oakley conservatory, and begged him to believe that she should always regard and esteem him as a friend, and never cease to be interested in his welfare. In fact she said pretty much what a lady generally does say, when she is in earnest about refusing a man whom she yet does not positively dislike,—when she wishes to make her meaning perfectly plain, and yet to do it as kindly as possible. Only I am afraid in her case the words must have had a false ring about

them, for they were written so mechanically. Her mind was quite pre-occupied. All the time that her fingers were moving over the paper, she was thinking far less of Sir Ralph, to whom she was writing, than of some one else, and of the picture that some one else had conjured up before her of himself lying out in the snowy nights among the trenches of Sebastopol, "with his face to the stars," dreaming of England, and it might be of her.

The letter was written at last and sealed, for it was before the days of crests and monograms, and Edith always sealed her letters with a small signet ring; and then came the question of despatching it. She did not know much about the cross posts; and after all, she knew it was a great chance whether it would reach Sir Ralph before he started on the next day. Still there *was* a chance, and on no account was she disposed to lose it. She had just left her room with the intention of putting her letter in the post-bag, or finding out whether any

servants were likely to be going into the village, when she met her cousin Harry coming along the passage to his own room, arrayed in a prodigiously thick pair of boots, a very ancient 'Europe' hat, and a rough overcoat, which looked as if it was intended to defy an avalanche.

"You don't mean to say you are going to church again in this snow-storm?" Edith exclaimed with considerable astonishment.

"Well, I mean to make a try for it," was the answer. "I'm not going to Haughton, though; but there's a service held now of an afternoon in the school-room at Ripley, and that's not much above half a mile across the fields; I think I can manage that. Old Mr. Forbes comes over from Bristol to do it himself, and he likes to see some of the gentry there occasionally, for the sake of example."

"How I wish I could go too!" exclaimed Edith; "I do so like those sort of voluntary services."

"It's quite out of the question," answered

Harry authoritatively, and looking a little horrified at the idea. "It would be preposterous for any woman to dream of putting her foot out in such weather. But a man's a different thing. The old gentleman's sure to come over, whatever the weather is, and it's rather hard if I can't manage to get there too."

"You'll only get the ague," observed Edith reassuringly.

"Thank you for the pleasant suggestion," he answered laughing; "but I don't think so. Falling snow does not hurt one much, and I can take off this much-enduring outer garment when I get there. I must take my chance, however, for I shall have to rough it soon, whether I like it or no. It will never do for me to be funkng at the idea of a snow-storm a month hence. Shall I post that letter for you?" he continued without giving her time to answer. "I can put it into the box at the turnpike as I pass, and you'll gain a post that way, for the mail-cart picks up the letters there, three or four hours later than it does at Haughton."

He laid his finger upon the letter she was holding as he spoke ; but Edith instinctively drew back, and hesitated for a moment before she gave it into his hand. It was a little awkward to let him post that letter of all others, but perhaps it would be still more awkward to refuse, after what he had said. After all, she was doing nothing she was ashamed of ; and she thought she could trust to Harry's honour and generosity, if to any one's, as well she might.

" You are quite sure you won't forget it?" she said, holding it towards him in a pretty deprecating sort of way.

" Quite sure," he answered ; " I promise you I will not." And, like the loyal gentleman that he was, he put the note into his breast-pocket and never once looked at the superscription either then or afterwards, though I believe, for that matter, he knew perfectly well for whom it was intended, as he had heard in the stables that one of Sir Ralph's grooms had been over while they were at church, and had brought a letter for Miss Vivian.

“If I should get lost in the snow, as is just possible, you had better send Prince Rupert and my greyhound after me to fish me out,” was Harry’s parting observation as he turned into his own room ; “I think they could do a little St. Bernard’s work between them at a pinch.”

“It would not be from any want of will on Rupert’s part at any rate, if he couldn’t,” replied Edith. She wished her cousin a pleasant walk, and a *warm* welcome, and then she went downstairs and offered to read to her uncle, who was sitting alone in the library. He wanted to have the ‘Saturday Review,’ but this she protested against, ‘assigning reasons,’ and suggested Jeremy Taylor instead. At last a compromise was effected, and she read George Herbert to him till it became quite too dark to see.

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Miss Vivian’s letter was delivered at Oakley by the first post on the following morning, and was opened and read by the person to whom it was addressed before he had

tasted a morsel of breakfast—opened and read through twice over, but not acted upon. There was a large spice of obstinacy in Sir Ralph's disposition, as we have before seen ; he was not easily to be turned aside from the pursuit of anything he had set his mind upon attaining,—whether it might be a fox's brush, or a fair lady's hand,—and so, when he had got to the end of Edith's letter for the second time, he set his teeth hard, and swore with many naughty words that he would see her in spite of all she might choose to say.

Now, if Edith had been wise, she would have made a point of taking a long walk in the country somewhere by herself if she could get no one to go with her, and so of being out of the way in case 'visitors called.' But after what Captain Neville had said about the post-box at the turnpike, she made so very sure that Sir Ralph would receive her letter, and having received it, would never dream of coming over, that she took no precautions of the kind. And so

it happened that she was completely taken by surprise when she heard that he was in the house. Coming out of her own room about twelve o'clock, she met her cousin Harry in the corridor, almost exactly in the same spot as she had done the night before. He stopped and said to her in as unconcerned a manner as he could well accomplish, "Oh, by the bye, Ralph has just driven Fanny over in his dog-cart, and he's asking to see you before he goes back; you'll find him in the little drawing-room." Edith turned as pale as death, and began to tremble so violently, that she was obliged to lean against the wall to support herself.

"Oh, Harry, what *shall* I do?" she exclaimed without giving herself time to think of what she was saying. "I cannot see him." And her lip began to quiver very ominously. If he had a doubt before as to what her ultimate decision with regard to Sir Ralph might be, I think that doubt disappeared then and for ever.

But he took no ungenerous advantage of that moment of weakness; he did not even seem to notice the words which had escaped her lips.

"You don't seem quite the thing this morning, Edith," he said kindly; "what is the matter?"

"I didn't sleep well last night," she answered, recovering herself with an effort.

"You are cold, too," he continued, touching her hand; "actually shivering. Come in here a minute and warm yourself before you go down; that is to say, if those stupid maids have not let my fire out again, as usual." He pushed open the door of his own room as he spoke, and drew her gently within it. "There," he went on, "allow me to introduce you to my sanctum. It is not quite a lady's room, I am afraid, it always *will* get into such a glorious mess; and it smells rather too strong of the 'shameful,' as they call the fragrant weed somewhere in Arabia."

So he went rattling on, and then pro-

ceeded to poke the fire vigorously, till it burnt up into a bright flame, keeping his back turned to his cousin the while, all with the same kind purpose of giving her time to 'come round.'

Edith in the meantime had sunk into the first chair she came to, just immediately to the right of the door, not at all sorry to find herself thus seated, for she was trembling all over, and feeling rather faint. She looked round the room and mentally echoed Harry's observation about its being in a mess. It was pretty much in the same state as it had been the first time she had seen it. Certainly the bump of tidiness could not have been very strongly developed in Captain Neville's cranium. But in that hasty survey she had yet time enough to note, that her sketch of the Drachenfels had disappeared from its place on the mantelpiece, where she had last seen it. Whether this trifling fact gave her a fresh access of courage or not I cannot say, but by the time he had finished poking the fire she was quite able to speak to him again.

"Cousin Harry, I am going to ask you to do something for me. I think you will?"

If he could only have seen the pleading look in those uplifted eyes, I believe he would have sworn on the spot to do her bidding, whatever it might be; but as it was he retained sufficient command over himself to say, "Tell me what it is."

"I want you to go down stairs and tell Sir Ralph I cannot see him this morning. Ask him not to wait—to go home again."

"And what reason am I to give him, fair cousin?" he asked lightly.

"Tell him I am not well if you like; it is quite true."

"When may he come again, then? I heard him say he must speak to you."

"Oh no, no!" she exclaimed, "don't let him come any more, Harry. I cannot see him again indeed."

Her head was bent forward in the effort to hide her burning cheeks, and it was impossible any longer to mistake her meaning.

Harry's manner changed at once from gay to grave.

"If you will only give yourself time to think, Edith," he said kindly, "you will see, I think, as plainly as I do, that no one can tell him this so well as yourself."

He was standing opposite to her now, looking her full in the face.

"Oh, but I have told him so more than once. Last week at Oakley, and again yesterday, when I wrote to him and begged him not to come. I told him—"

"Hush, dear !" Harry interrupted, laying his hand gently on her shoulder, as a brother might have done. "Don't tell me anything that you will be sorry to have told me an hour hence. I think I can guess enough of your secret to know why it must be so painful to you to meet him again ; but for all that I believe you ought to do it. I think you owe him as much as that."

Edith started to her feet, with her eyes flashing and her lip quivering.

“I did not come here to be told what I ought or ought not to do. Not to ask for your advice, but for your help,” she exclaimed indignantly as she walked past him out of the room. “I thought you would have done as much as this for me, Cousin Harry, but I am sorry that I asked you down now.”

But he followed her quickly and stopped her before she was fairly outside the door. “Stop !” he said, “I cannot let you go like this ;” and he pressed her back into the chair with a degree of authority that admitted of no resistance. She hid her face in her hands and the tears came raining down in good earnest now.

Then he gently closed the door which had been standing wide open till then.

Oh, what an intense longing there was in his heart at that moment to take her in his arms and comfort her then and there. And I question if she would have been altogether angry if he had done so, though it would have been a strange time to choose for such

a demonstration, while that other lover was waiting so impatiently down below. It would have been like a dream of perfect peace to have rested her head on his shoulder and to have felt that strong arm thrown round her. She too had her longing, a longing which had lasted through half her lifetime (in spite of that visionary theory of an independent single life), of just such an arm as this to shield her, just such a true heart as his to trust to and to lean upon. But the demon of pride which all along had kept him, the poor man, aloof from his *rich* cousin, had the mastery over him yet, and he restrained himself even in that moment of fierce temptation from any word or sign which might have betrayed his real feelings, though he had grown far paler than she was, before he spoke to her again. He was always unnerved by the sight of a woman's tears, as what true man is not?

“Don't cry so bitterly, Edith,” he said at last in a strained voice. “Listen to me

for a moment. You know, or perhaps you don't know, that there are not many things in the world I would not do for you if I could; but this is one of the few things I can't do. At least, I can, of course, go down and tell him what you say—only it would be of no use. No man would take such an answer coming to him through another man; it is not likely. *I* wouldn't for one, I know. Don't think I say so on my own account, or because I want to shirk doing it; that's not the case, though I don't want poor old Ralph to hate me quite either. We have been friends together ever since I used to carry him about on my shoulders, when he was quite a young chap, and he wouldn't feel disposed to love me much, I fancy, the day after to-morrow, when he comes to his right mind again, if he remembers that I have been mixed up in this matter. But I'll risk all that! I'll go down this very moment and tell him all you said just now, if you still wish me to do so. I will, indeed, if you ask me; but upon my

word and honour, Edith, I *do* think you ought to do it for yourself."

There was silence for a moment or two, during which he stood watching her.

"I wouldn't mind so much," she said at last in a broken voice, gulping back her tears, "only I don't know how to deal with a man like that. He persecutes me."

"He does almost," replied Harry in a lighter tone. "Well, my dear cousin, let him persecute a little more, and I will horsewhip him for you if you like. Only go down and speak to the poor fellow just this once (he is very young, remember), you need not stay long, and I promise you that you shall have no more trouble with him after that."

"Very well, I suppose it must be so," said Edith, rising slowly and accepting her fate with a sort of dreary resignation. "Do I look as if I had been crying?" she added, walking deliberately to the looking-glass over the mantelpiece to wipe her eyes, and put herself otherwise a little 'to rights.'

“Not a bit,” he replied, laughing; “and if you did it would not matter.”

“You are not angry with me, are you?” he asked in a lower tone, holding out his hand to her as she passed back.

“No,” she said, but not very cordially. All the same she gave him her hand.

Did she remember how he had treated that same ‘little hand’ only yesterday, and wonder in her own mind whether he would repeat the experiment now? He did nothing of the kind this time however, only pressing her cold fingers lightly for a moment in his own. “That’s a good girl,” he observed rather patronizingly. The tone stung her pride, and, as a result, she walked away feeling somewhat stronger than she might otherwise have done.

Harry Neville watched her as she went slowly and dreamily down the broad staircase till she was fairly out of sight. Then he closed the door of his room. He did not bang it in the least, but he locked and double-locked it against all intruders; and

sitting down in a chair beside the table, he buried his head in his hands, and groaned aloud.

And for my part I think he was a young fool for his pains.

## CHAPTER V.

THIS was not the first trying interview that Captain Neville had had to go through that day.

There had been 'grief' at the Haughton Manor House throughout the whole morning, and every member of the family seemed more or less out of sorts in consequence. In fact there had been a regular 'row in the rookery.' And, as I once heard it observed, "not without *cause*."

Very soon after breakfast Harry had sought out his father in the library, and there confided to him his secretly cherished and well matured purpose of joining the British troops before Sebastopol as a volunteer. Of course the poor old man had been

terribly shocked and grieved at the disclosure. It made him quite ill. He entreated with tears in his eyes that his son would give up the idea. What could he do to induce him to remain at home? Would nothing tempt him?

He would give him a handsome allowance—the whole control of the house; he would do his utmost to get him an appointment for the next two years.

“Nothing,” Harry had answered, his mind was made up. He believed this quixotic proceeding to be a duty; and so he turned a deaf ear to all his poor old father’s pleadings.

Now, I have no wish to excuse Captain Neville’s conduct. On the contrary, I consider it was both selfish and cowardly under the present circumstances. It was all very well for Arthur Fitzgerald, who had no family worth speaking of, to go and risk his life, to help and cheer his fellow-soldiers. In his case it might be a duty and a noble duty too. But in Harry Neville’s case, he having a sick father and loving sisters, who

looked up to him as the mainstay of the family, it was quite another affair.

However, when this young man had once learnt to look upon a certain course of conduct as right in his own eyes, it was not easy, not often possible to persuade him to the contrary. The Baronet had learnt this from experience, so he gave up the attempt as useless now. But the news had completely upset him, as he told Harry more in sorrow than in anger, and when the latter left the room, he begged him to shut the door close, and to tell the people to leave him alone, for he wanted to stay there quiet for the rest of the morning.

Edith's interview with Sir Ralph Armytage did not last long. This time she must have succeeded in making her meaning pretty clear to him, for after a very few minutes he made his escape, with a flushed face and compressed lips, through the conservatory into the garden, and from thence to the stables, where he got into his dog-cart and drove away, without vouchsafing a word to

any living creature, if we except a random oath which he fired off at starting at the unlucky stable-boy, for having let go his horse's head a moment too soon.

The house seemed strangely deserted to Edith, when soon afterwards she came out of the drawing-room looking deadly pale. She found little Fanny Price mooning about, all by herself, in the hall. "Grandpapa wasn't well, and was in the library, and mustn't be disturbed," the child said. "And Aunt Mary was crying, oh, so dreadfully, in her bed-room, about something, and wouldn't let her in. Was anything the matter? did Aunt Edith know?"

Aunt Edith did know then, but she did not tell Fanny Price.

"Where's mamma?" she asked of the child. "I have not seen her since breakfast."

"And I haven't seen her at all. Parker says she has gone home to the Farm with papa for the day, and won't be back till dinner-time. And there's Uncle Harry gone

off to Bristol on nasty horrid business, and wouldn't take me with him. Oh, dear! it is so dull. What shall I do, Aunt Edith?"

"Poor little mite," replied Edith, kissing her. "I daresay it is dull without your friend the peacock. You shall go for a walk with me after lunch, if you like."

Fanny thought she "should like," and immediately began planning where they would go.

Edith told her to settle it all as she liked best, and to tell her about it when she came down again. And then, breaking away from the little girl's demonstrative caresses, she escaped to her own room, and gained one precious half-hour for self-recollection, and quiet thought, before the luncheon bell summoned her to the dining-room.

Poor Mary Neville came down to lunch looking intensely miserable, her eyes red and swollen with crying. She begged Edith to forgive her apparent want of hospitality, and to excuse her if she did not talk much. "She was out of spirits," she said, "for she

had heard some bad news that morning, which she would tell her about some other time."

Edith kissed and petted up her poor little loving cousin, who was so many years older than herself, and yet so like a child still ; but she did not tell her, that she knew exactly what the bad news was, that she was fretting herself so sadly about. It never occurred to her to do this, though I believe it would have given Mary a certain dreary sort of satisfaction to know that her brother had selected Edith to be his first *confidante* on the subject of his projected expedition to the Crimea.

The walk after lunch with Fanny Price was a great success, so that young lady thought at least. She took immense pains to entertain her Aunt Edith ; carried her off to some of her favourite haunts, and finished up by introducing her at one or two of the cottages where she enacted the part of a small Lady Bountiful sometimes when she was staying at her grandpapa's, and

amused herself by patronizing sundry other children, some larger, some smaller than herself.

“Lord love the child!” one old granny said to Edith; “it does my heart good to see her, a dear. Why, I mind the time when her mamma, Miss Laura that was, was no higher than that table. Many’s the time she used to come in and beg for a sup of warm milk from our cow, when she was walking out with her governess and it was milking-time. She was very like Miss there at her age, only bigger. Dear, dear! to think how the time gets on. And Miss Laura was born within a week of my poor boy Tom, who was drowned at sea four years ago come next Lady Day. I hope Madam be quite well,” continued old Granny Jones, dropping a curtsy, and suddenly coming back from the past into the present, as she recollected that the wee Miss Laura of the old times was a portly matron, and the mother of a family now.

Fanny took upon herself to answer that

her mamma was quite well, and would no doubt have called with her, only she had gone back to the Farm with her papa for the day.

It was as good as a play to see this little girl picking a large fat baby, nearly as big as herself (Granny Jones's youngest grand-child), out of its cradle as she spoke, and proceeding to nurse the same with the utmost gravity. This was the comical view of the transaction, but it spoke of a tender and touching trait in the child's character, as Edith very well knew. Fanny, consummate little plague as she could sometimes be, was a good little 'fairy' on the whole. She would sit for hours stitching her fingers to the bone, to make garments for the little waifs and strays of mortality who needed them, and would go without sugar in her tea or butter on her bread for days together, under her mamma's direction, if she could thereby help pay a widow's rent or buy an extra luxury for some poor fretful invalid. There are many such kind little 'fairies'

as this one in the world, and is it wonderful that the poor learn to love them dearly ?

The walk was good for Edith also. The very effort she made to talk to and amuse her companion, took her out of herself for the time being, and this in itself was something, while the child's evident delight and excitement about everything they saw and passed, could not but be in some degree infectious. Besides this, Edith was an enthusiastic lover of nature in all her moods. The country looked lovely, clothed as it was in the mantle of snow which had fallen on the preceding day ; while the hoar frost, still keeping its frail hold on every tree and bush, was a sight so beautiful, that once seen, it could not easily be forgotten. The foliage of every tree and shrub was distinctly indicated by its delicate, dazzling burden. From the branches of the willows long wax-like pendants were hanging, which glittered like diamonds in the winter sun ; the fir-trees and the larches were covered all over, with the daintiest little silver spikes

of frost and snow ; while by the side of these the Portugal laurels, true to their more sombre nature, looked heavy and stately even in their whiteness. The whole scene seemed so fairy-like and unreal, that one might have fancied it had been conjured into existence by the magic of an enchanter's wand ; or rather, let us take a higher stand, and tracing the miracle of beauty to its true source, confess that it was the work of His Almighty hand, "Who giveth snow like wool, and scattereth the hoar frost like ashes."

The keen, crisp air was about as good a tonic as Edith could well have had for her nervous system, which had been a little unhinged by an almost sleepless night, and by the excitement and annoyances of the morning ; so that by the time she and Fanny reached home again, she felt altogether in better tune both with herself and with the world in general. She went straight up to her own room, for she had a letter to write before post-time.

Aunt Fanny had written to her on the Saturday from Enderleigh, in a very melancholy strain. She had had a sharpish attack of rheumatism, and this always made the poor old lady feel rather depressed. Everything seemed to be going wrong, according to her account; and although she did not say it in so many words, Edith understood plainly enough, from the whole tone of her letter, that she was longing to have her niece at home again. The fortnight which Miss Vivian had originally settled to stay at Haughton, had almost expired. And over and above this, she had, to use a vulgar expression, made the place too hot to hold her, by her flirtation with young Sir Ralph. His attentions had become so oppressive and pertinacious, that she felt as if she should be glad to put herself beyond all possible reach of them. And so she wrote and told her poor old aunt that she should certainly be back at Enderleigh before the week was over. The letter was written and directed, and sealed, but in consequence of an untimely accident, it was never sent.

When Edith had finished writing, she went downstairs and laid her letter on the slab in the hall, where they were always placed in readiness for the post-bag in the evening. Then she knocked at the library door, and having received a very subdued "Come in !" from her uncle, went in as she was told, and talked to Harry's poor old father till it was nearly time to dress for dinner. But before she had been back in her room for ten minutes, she remembered that when writing to her aunt she had forgotten to put into the letter a very important message for one of the gardeners. She therefore hurried over her 'toilette' as much as possible, and went down ready-dressed into the drawing-room to rectify the omission before dinner-time.

There was no light in the room beyond that which the fire gave, and at first she thought herself the only occupant ; but a minute after, the sound of somebody sneezing made her look up, and she discovered the figure of her cousin Harry stretched at

full length on one of the sofas at the other end of the room.

"I beg your pardon ; I'm afraid I made you start," he said, laughing. "But I've just come in from a long walk, and was doing the lazy for a few minutes before getting ready for dinner. Don't mind me, pray."

Then from out of the darkness the smaller figure of Fanny Price emerged. She went up to the sofa where her uncle was lying, and began monopolizing him in her usual fashion. But he was not quite in the mood for her polite attentions just then.

"Now, for Heaven's sake, child, do be quiet for once!" he exclaimed, sharply. "You never can leave a fellow alone for five minutes together."

The poor little girl, not used to be thus repulsed, by him at least, pulled rather a long face, and for a moment looked half inclined to cry. But she thought better of it, and made her way up to Edith, to see what amusement could be got out of her instead.

Now, it so happened that Edith had been so intent on her own occupation, that she had not heard Captain Neville's words, which had been muttered in rather a low tone, or she might have been more careful not to hurt the child's feelings. But as it was, when Fanny began pulling her writing things about one after another, and asking, for the hundredth time 'what everything was for,' Edith laid her hand upon the little roving fingers, and said, quietly,

"Fanny, dear, don't tease me now, there's a good child. I'm very busy, don't you see, because I must finish this letter before post-time. There's Uncle Harry over there, go and talk to him."

"Uncle Harry's so cross, and nobody wants me," said the child pitifully, and the poor little lip began to quiver in good earnest now.

Edith was terribly distressed. She laid down her pen, and addressed herself to the task of comforting the 'wee woman's' wounded spirit, kissing away her tears be-

fore they had even time to fall. But she had not been employed thus above a minute, when Fanny was suddenly seized by her two arms and hoisted on to the shoulder of some one who had got up from the sofa and come behind them unperceived.

“Come along, sprite,” said a rich, cheery voice. “Uncle Harry’s not cross now; and if you make great haste, perhaps we shall have time for a game of battledore and shuttlecock in the hall before dinner. At any rate, I shan’t let you stop here to teaze your Aunt Edith, you young Countess of Worry and Plague.”

“That’s what Uncle Harry always calls me!” exclaimed Fanny, restored at once to smiles and cheerfulness, surveying the room triumphantly from her vantage-ground on her uncle’s shoulder, and at the same time nearly throttling him by her exuberant caresses as he carried her off.

Edith looked up and nodded to her, and still she watched the two as they went away together, the tall strong soldier and the little

girl. Many persons might have been disposed to 'write the man down a muff' who, all wearied as he was, could thus give up his own personal ease and comfort, to minister to the pleasure of an exacting child. But Edith was of a different opinion. How far the indulgence might be good for the *child*, was an open question ; but as regarded the glimpse it gave of the man's nature, there could be no manner of doubt, she thought.

Then she resumed her interrupted occupation, not a little confused, however, by the noise of the battledores, and the occasional shouts of delight which were to be heard in the hall.

At last she succeeded in adding a somewhat incoherent postscript to her already written letter, and then she folded it up, and prepared to seal it over again.

To do this she had to light a little taper which was standing on the table in front of her ; the firelight had hitherto sufficed, while she was only writing. She was sit-

ting at a table placed not far from the fireplace, which was immediately behind her; and when she saw that the candle had 'made up its mind to burn,' Edith turned half round in her chair, and threw the lucifer-match she had used in lighting it into the fire, *as she thought*.

She went on sealing her letter deliberately, replaced the signet-ring on her finger, blew out the candle, and then, only then, discovered to her horror that the match had fallen short of the fire, and had dropped still burning on to the flounce of her silk dress. The lace trimming had caught like tinder, and already the lower part of the dress was in a blaze.

She was completely taken off her guard, and starting up, she gave such a shriek as she had never given in all her life before; a shriek which brought Captain Neville and his little niece in awe-struck haste to the drawing-room door, almost before its echoes had died away.

The latter gave one frightened glance into

the room, and then fled screaming and sobbing to spread the horrible tidings about the house ; but Harry stood rooted to the spot like a statue, his brow and lips contracted into an expression of positive agony, waiting to see what could be done.

It was not much that he could do in that first moment ; for though Edith, after that one awful shriek, did not scream again, she began to do what almost every woman does under the circumstances—to rush wildly round and round the room. Five minutes before she would have declared herself incapable of such an act of utter folly, but she was beside herself with fear, perhaps with pain, for the flames were rising now, and almost touched her arm. Let us not judge her harshly, reader ; you and I might do the same if we were to be placed in similar circumstances. It is not well for any man (much less for any woman) to assert rashly what he would or would not do, if suddenly, and without any warning, he were to find himself *on fire*.

Harry seized the velvet cloth which covered the table where Edith had been writing ; it was but small, but it was the only thing he could lay his hands upon, and held it in readiness to throw over her when she came near him ; but she was mad, and eluded his grasp.

Then came a moment of danger for which he had not been prepared. The door leading from the drawing-room into the conservatory was standing wide open, and the outer one from the conservatory to the garden was also ajar ; he himself had left them so, when he came in half-an-hour before.

Before he could dream of her intention, or attempt to stop it, the terrified girl, attracted by something she saw,—by the snow, perhaps,—rushed past him through the open doors into the cold, white garden beyond. He followed hard after her, grinding his teeth with pain and horror. Swift runner as he was, she distanced him then, for she ran as one possessed. But his voice could reach her still. “ Stop ! stand still ! ” he

shouted, almost savagely, and with an effort which was almost superhuman, she obeyed him.

In one instant he had come up with her, in the next (some good angel must have put the thought into his head) he had thrown her headlong upon a heap of soft snow, which he remembered to have seen the gardeners piling up by the side of the pathway in the morning.

She struggled with him, but he had fast hold of her now. "Lie down!" he shouted again, almost as fiercely as before. He held her down with all the force of his strong arms; he heaped and piled up the loose snow upon her burning dress; he pressed the tablecloth, saturated through and through now with the snow-water, tightly down over her neck and arms. And so, very soon, in less than half the time it has taken me to relate, the fire was out, and only one or two smouldering sparks remained of what a few moments before had been a hungry, leaping flame.

The fire was out, and she was saved from the most horrible of all deaths. Harry sprang to his feet, and even in that moment of intense excitement, he found time to thank his God that it was so. Then he lifted her tenderly from her cold bed on the melted snow, with much more of gentleness than he had used before, and led, almost carried her back towards the house. She did not seem faint, or unable to walk, but she never spoke a single word. The whole thing had occupied scarcely more than a minute; little Fanny had even then only just reached her Aunt Mary's bedroom to tell her the dreadful tale. But when Captain Neville led Edith back into the drawing-room, and the flickering firelight fell upon her face, he was more frightened than ever to see the change those few seconds had made. She looked as if turned to stone. Every feature was rigid, her eyes fixed and almost starting out of her head, her teeth set hard, and her hands clenched as if in agony.

Harry staggered back shuddering. He

did not think she could be badly burnt, there had not been time enough for that; but he feared the shock had turned her brain, or that she was going into a fit. This was even worse than what had gone before. Then he had known that he could and *would* do something to save her, but here was a new evil he was utterly powerless to avert.

He forgot everything then, everything but his own misery and her danger. "Edith, my own darling Edith!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms round her; "don't look like that! For Heaven's sake speak to me, say something; cry, do anything but look like that."

His voice seemed to recall her to her right senses. Even then she did her best to obey him; she tried to speak, but it was of no use, the words would not come, and only seemed to choke her. She gave one gasping, hysterical sob, and the next moment, with her head upon his shoulder, she was crying as if her very heart would break.

## CHAPTER VI.

It was well for Edith Vivian that her constitution was a perfectly sound and healthy one, otherwise a brain fever, or some other dangerous illness, might have been the result of the shock which her nerves had sustained. But as it was, no very serious consequences supervened.

Harry gave her over almost jealously into the care of the terrified women, who came flocking into the room, in less than three minutes from the moment when that wretched lucifer-match had fallen on Edith's dress.

Mrs. Price had not returned, and poor Mary Neville was far too frightened and miserable to be of any use ; but fortunately one of the women servants (the old nurse whose

services had been offered to Harry by his father a few days before) was equal to the emergency. She took the sobbing girl into her motherly old arms, and carried her off to bed, soothing and petting her like a tired child all the while. Then Captain Neville rushed round to the stable, and ordered the coachman to saddle Rob Roy, and ride off to fetch the best doctor in Bristol, as fast as the horse would carry him. He would have gone himself, only, for more reasons than one, he doubted if his own hand would be steady enough to hold the reins.

Sir Edward Neville, though Edith's shriek must have penetrated even to where he sat in the closed library, never knew of his niece's danger till it was past, or it might have gone hard with him. Fanny's quick wit had suggested to her that grandpapa could do no good, and so had better not be told.

Old Nurse Fullalove soon cleared Miss Vivian's bedroom of the helpless woman-kind who had crowded in after her; and

having selected one young housemaid, who looked less likely to faint than any of the others, to wait upon her, she proceeded to take off Edith's dress, or rather the small portion which yet remained of it, and to ascertain the extent of her injuries. These were not so serious as might have been expected. One of her arms was rather badly scorched, but otherwise she was not much hurt. Fortunately for her, she had felt a little cold after her walk, and had put on a silk dress instead of one of the delicate muslins she generally wore in the evening, or she would not have escaped so easily. Fortunately, too, the sleeping-draught which the doctor administered upon his arrival, took a good effect; and Edith, tired out as she was by want of rest the night before, slept soundly and quietly for several hours. Her poor arm had been bound up by the experienced nurse in a thick poultice of moist whiting, long before the doctor made his appearance, and very soon this had the effect of relieving the pain, which at first

had been very acute. So, when she awoke the next morning, considerably refreshed, in spite of the opiate, by those few hours' sleep, she did not seem very much the worse for the accident which might have been so fatal in its results.

Of course she was still suffering a good deal from reaction after the excitement she had gone through, and her nerves were so far upset, that she could do little else than cry when anybody spoke to her. Seeing this, Nurse Fullalove shut the door against all intruders, and kept her patient quiet in bed until Dr. Linctus paid his morning visit.

She had sat up with Edith through the night, dozing at intervals in the large easy-chair in front of the fire. Waking up from one of these little snoozes about two o'clock in the morning, her attention was attracted by a sound in the corridor outside, the sound of some one walking in a pair of creaking boots, who was yet anxious to make as little noise as possible.

The old woman roused herself, snuffed her candle, and then went and opened the door so suddenly, that she surprised Harry Neville in the very act of stooping down and listening at the keyhole for any sounds which might be heard inside the door. He looked a little foolish at being thus detected, but even then he could not restrain a laugh at the sight of his old nurse, arrayed as she was, in a voluminous flannel dressing-gown, covered by a miraculous multitude of useless capes, and a nightcap which towered to a majestic height above her head, and then toppled over again in a sort of avalanche of frills, and which was a fearful and wonderful structure to behold.

The sight of that nightcap called to his mind many associations belonging to his early days; visions of grey powders cunningly disguised in strawberry-jam, and stirred with a needle in a spoon; vague recollections of a kind, soft hand laid on throbbing temples at the time of measles and chicken-pox; and more vivid ones of nocturnal visits,

accompanied by treacle-possets, etc., in times of colds,—all these rose up before him as he looked upon that marvellous erection, and for a moment he forgot the present in the past.

A whispered voice coming from beneath the frills, recalled his wandering thoughts. “Now, Master ’Arry,” it said, “do go to bed and be quiet, there’s a dear, good boy, instead of disturbing the ’ouse like this. We’re a going on beautiful, and sleeping as quiet as a lamb. She’s only turned just once or twice, and moaned in her sleep a little, poor dear, as was only to be expected. But even if she was restless, you couldn’t do no good ; not now, you know,” she added, suddenly recollecting, that it was owing to this man, humanly speaking, that Edith was alive at all.

“No, I don’t suppose I could do much good, as you say,” Harry answered, laughing, but still in a whisper ; “but you see I was rather restless, and so I thought I’d just come over and hear if you were all quiet. I didn’t mean to cheat you out of

your forty winks though, Fully, dear. It's all the fault of these horrid boots, for of course my slippers had hidden themselves as usual, and couldn't be found anywhere when I wanted them. But now I am here, you may as well see if you can do anything to these fingers of mine, for they ache like something, I can tell you, and I can't get to sleep for the pain."

The frilled nightcap bobbed down in a great hurry over the hand he held towards her, and the keen old eyes beneath it took in at a glance the nature and intent of the injury. An expression of genuine pity and dismay escaped her lips, and then she bade Harry go into Edith's dressing-room, the door of which stood open, and said she would come to him there in a minute.

She was as good as her word, and very soon bandaged up his fingers, much in the same way as she had done Edith's arm, expressing much concern all the time about her "poor dear boy's" sufferings, for his right hand was in reality very badly burnt and

blistered, and ought to have been attended to hours before, only he had not thought fit to say anything about it till now.

“You’re sure my cousin is sleeping quite comfortably?” he asked again, when she had finished her operations.

“Lord love the boy! why, of course she is. Didn’t I tell you so before? You can take a peep at her yourself if you don’t believe me,” she added, pushing the door of Edith’s room open just a little wider.

But Harry’s chivalry was proof against this temptation. “No, no,” he said, making a sudden retreat. “I quite believe you without that, and she wouldn’t like it if she knew. Good night, Fully, dear, and mind you take great care of her, for she’s worth it,” he added, rewarding the old woman with one of those precious kisses with which he was wont to delight her soul about twice a year, on great occasions.

“Now, never you mind about her, dearie, she’ll do very well,” was Mrs. Fullalove’s answer. “You go to bed, and to sleep if you

can, and don't be a rampaging about the passages any more, for all the world like a ghost, and looking just fit to have the ague."

"No fear of that," whispered Harry, as he nodded to her, and went away on tip-toe. His bedroom happened to be at the extreme other end of the passage, so he had to do a good deal of creaking with those 'horrid boots' before he finally reached it. Having locked the door he turned into bed in a very much more comfortable frame of mind and body than he had been enjoying previously.

"Worth taking care of, is she?" the old woman murmured, as she settled herself again in the armchair by the fire. "Hem! I should think so now, if I hadn't knowed it afore. Bless his dear heart, such a good boy as he's always been to his old nuss, bringing her such a beautiful shawl all the way from the Hingies, the dear, and never giving her so much as a cross word in all his life, not even when he had the mumps!"

With this retrospective reflection she gave *the* nightcap a final shake by way of settling down, and very soon from under its frilled magnificence—

“ There was a sound of *snoring* by night ! ”

\* \* \* \*

We are going on very nicely, nurse, very nicely indeed,” said Dr. Linctus, a fussy good-tempered little man of about five feet five, when he paid his visit to Edith on the following morning. “ Nothing could be better. No, do not undo those bandages, pray. The arm is progressing quite favourably, I am sure ; and it is my motto always to leave well alone. There is a certain degree of nervous depression about our young friend,” he added, as he laid his hand on Edith’s pulse, “ which is perhaps only natural under the circumstances, but which must not be encouraged. I see no reason that she should keep in bed. Much better get up an hour or two hence, and lie on the sofa in some quiet room downstairs.

Only we must avoid all excitement, nurse, and particularly all allusions to the painful subject of yesterday."

The last words were spoken in a low tone to Mrs. Fullalove, as he left the room after having taken a formal but courteous leave of his patient.

"Keep her in bed, indeed! as if I was a-going to!" was the only remark the old lady thought fit to make, in reply to the little doctor's observations as soon as his back was turned.

Later on in the afternoon, in consequence of the permission thus given, Edith was attired by Nurse Fullalove and Susan (who begged with tears in her eyes to be allowed to help her mistress) in a picturesque sort of dressing-gown, surmounted by a loose scarlet jacket, and conducted with some state and ceremony to the sofa in the drawing-room, that being considered to be the quietest room in the house; a confused array of women and children following in the rear of the procession.

Here, after a short interval, during which Miss Neville teased her a good deal with many well-meant but oppressive attentions, she was left to herself and her own reflections.

To such reflections, at least, as she was capable of making, for her mind was in a strangely confused and bewildered state. She seemed hardly able to think at all, or to realize what had happened ; and she kept reproaching herself with not feeling half thankful enough, for her preservation from the awful danger of the previous night. Much of this state of bewilderment was, as she knew, owing to the morphine she had taken the night before ; but over and above all there was a sense of dreamy happiness which was not so easy to define, and which she cared not to analyse too curiously, lest the foundation on which it rested should prove a treacherous one.

Her arm gave her comparatively little pain, thanks to the prompt application of the whiting, and, being still drowsy from the

effects of the narcotic, she lay for some time in a state of semi-consciousness, doing her best, and with tolerable success, to think of nothing; and from this she gradually subsided into a very peaceful slumber, from which she woke about an hour afterwards feeling considerably refreshed, and with a pretty healthy colour in her cheeks, which would have delighted the kind heart of little Dr. Linctus if he had been there to see it.

But it was no part of the programme he had sketched out for her benefit, that the first object her eyes rested upon, should be the figure of her cousin Harry, who was standing in his favourite attitude on the opposite side of the fireplace to that on which her sofa had been placed, with one arm leaning on the mantelpiece, and his eyes fixed steadily upon her as she lay.

Of course he had no business to be there, and ought to have been carefully warned off the premises. But the truth was, no one had seen much of him since the morn-

ing, and it was the popular belief among the household that he had gone off to Bristol, as he had done on the preceding day. Captain Neville was one of those gentlemen of whom I can number a good many amongst my acquaintance, who inveigh violently against lunch as an institution, *in theory*, but whose *practice* is to partake of that meal six days out of seven. But on this particular occasion he had not put in his appearance at the lunch-table. He had not gone so far as Bristol, however, but had contented himself by walking over to a kennel about a mile distant, to see how a fine pointer, which had been hurt a few days before, was going on. There he met the owner of the dog, who was a friend, and returning with him to his house, the two spent an hour or so together gossiping, and consuming sherry and biscuits in company. After that Harry went home, and strolled about the stables and garden at Haughton till it grew dusk, feeling rather miserable and ill at ease.

For in truth his hand had been severely scorched by the flames of Edith's dress before he had succeeded in extinguishing them, and having been neglected for so many hours, was more inflamed and painful now than was her arm, over which so much more fuss had been made. He felt feverish and restless from the pain, but he chose to make light of it to the others; and no one but the old nurse, who had dressed his hand the night before, guessed how much he had been hurt.

He came in as usual through the conservatory into the drawing-room, stopping instinctively this time to shut the two doors behind him, as he thought with a shudder of what might have been the result of his carelessness on the preceding evening. It was his intention to go at once to his own 'study,' as it was courteously called; but just as he was crossing the drawing-room, Prince Rupert, who had been keeping strict guard over his mistress, came trotting towards him, and without so much as

giving a single bark, poked his cold nose into the Captain's hand by way of welcome. He stooped to pat the dog's head, and in doing so caught sight of Edith lying on the sofa by the fire, looking more lovely than ever in her bright scarlet jacket, and with her hair gathered carelessly into a knot at the back of her head, and covered with a sort of golden net.

After that he seemed to forget all about his previous intention ; and drawing near to the fire he waited and watched quietly till she should awake.

Edith was so taken by surprise at seeing him there, that her first impulse was to shut her eyes again, and make believe as though she were still asleep ; but he had seen them open for a moment, and had noticed her slight movement on waking, so was not to be thus taken in.

" I am very glad to see you down again, Edith, very glad indeed," he said simply ; and going up to her sofa he held out his hand.

Then, when she had to speak, the old choking hysterical feeling which she had been struggling against all the morning came over her again, and she found that she was weaker than she had thought. It was as much as she could do to keep back the rising tears, so she put her hand into his, without saying a word, and just nodded her head by way of thanks. In the dim firelight she never noticed that it was his left hand that he had given her.

He drew a chair towards him, and sat down close to her sofa.

She lay quite still for a few moments, with her eyes closed, till she had recovered her breath.

"I don't suppose I ought to let you sit there," she said at last, forcing a smile; "for I had strict orders from the doctor to keep very quiet, and not to speak to anybody, if he let me come downstairs. And besides I have no business to see company in this costume; it's supposed to be a dressing-gown."

“It’s very becoming, whatever it is,” he answered, a little abruptly. (It was the simple statement of a fact, and by no means purported to be a compliment, so there was no need for her to blush as she did.) “And I don’t mean to go away, not just directly; at least, unless you say I am to.”

But Edith did not say he was to, and so he stayed. She was silent again for another minute or so, and then very timidly she laid her hand upon his arm. “Harry, you must let me thank you just a very little for what you did last night,” she said, almost in a whisper, and with a dangerous trembling in her voice. “I should have been dead before now, I do believe, if it had not been for you.”

By way of answer he took captive the little hand she had held towards him, and imprisoned it in his own.

“Thank me, if you will, Edith,” he said, “but there is no need. God knows I am thankful enough myself.”

His head was turned away from her as he spoke ; and there was something so sad and moody in his whole bearing, that Edith lifted herself a little on one elbow, and looked intently into his face. As she did so, the fire which had been burning rather dimly fell together and broke into a blaze, which lighted up the whole room. In the same instant Edith caught sight of his bandaged arm. The shock and the surprise were too much for her, and she burst into tears.

“What *is* the matter?” he exclaimed, terrified in his turn.

“Oh, Harry, I am so sorry, so very sorry,” she sobbed ; “nobody ever told me *you* were hurt.”

“Oh, is that all?” he answered, in lighter tone, and pressing her trembling fingers, which he still held in his ‘good’ hand. “Nobody knew much about it, I fancy, except old Fullalove, who dressed my wounds for me very scientifically, when you were fast asleep last night. Don’t cry so, Edith, it’s not worth fretting about. See,

there's not much the matter after all ;" and as he spoke he took his right arm out of the sling which supported it, and held the points of the fingers towards her.

But Edith was crying too much now either to look or to speak. The next moment, however, it might have been to hide her tears, or it might have been only the simple expression of her gratitude, she bent her head till it rested on his arm, and her lips touched the kind strong hand which had helped to save her life. He started away from her, and turned as pale as death.

"Hush, don't, Edith !" he exclaimed, in a low hoarse voice, "do you know what you are doing? Either you want to drive me mad, or else to make me the happiest man in the whole world."

There was no answer.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked again, as patiently as he could ; "which is it to be?"

His impetuosity had frightened back her

tears, but it was fully a minute before she could summon voice enough to answer.

"I don't want to drive you mad," she said at last.

"Then you mean to make me happy?"

"Why shouldn't you be happy?" she asked, in a low voice, still keeping her eyes bent down.

Ah! why should he *not* be happy? That was the question which neither he himself, nor any one else could have answered any time during those two past weeks.

"Listen, Edith," he said, controlling his voice with a strong effort; "*I was* mad last night, I believe. I said things I had no right to say, perhaps, but which I mean to say over again now, because they are true. I called you my darling, and so you are, my heart's best darling; for I love you, dear, as I never thought to love any woman in the world. I have fought against my weakness, if it is a weakness, for weeks and months, but it has been all of no use; and now the truth is out, and I shall know my

fate. Don't keep me in suspense, Edith ; send me away at once for a presumptuous fool, if you will, or else tell me if you think you could ever get to love me in return."

I do pity Harry Neville that he could not see the bright light of happiness which came into Edith's eyes as she listened to those last words, or the pretty half saucy smile which played about her lips, as she made answer almost in a whisper,

"Perhaps I could, if I were to try very hard."

After all, he did *not* deserve it, matter of fact unbelieving fellow that he was. He would not be contented even yet, not even though the little hand which he had released, had been slipped into his clasp again of its own accord.

"You are saying this out of gratitude, Edith," he said, a little touchily, "and that is about the last thing I wish. It would be the cruellest kindness of all to deceive me or yourself in such a way as that. It is

your free love that I want, and nothing short of that will satisfy me; but if I had saved your life twenty times over, I wouldn't have you think for a moment that I have a shadow of right to ask for it, more than any other man in the world."

He was very hard upon her certainly, and yet she could only love him more and more for his perverse spirit of independence. If he had been playing a very deep game, as perhaps he was, nothing could have succeeded better. Till then he had hardly been able to obtain even a glimpse of her face; but now she raised herself from her drooping attitude, and lifting her glorious eyes, looked him full in the face. "Harry," she said, "I told you a fib just now, when I said that I would try to love you. There is no need for me to try, for I couldn't help loving you even if I would. It's a dreadful thing to have to confess, but I do believe" (her head had been drawn so near to his shoulder now, that there was no need for her to speak loud), "I do believe I

have cared for you ever since the first day we met."

Then at last he understood her, though he had been so slow of heart to believe the happiness which was in store for him. Even now, he made but little show of his triumph, although his heart was beating as if it would burst its bonds.

The arm which had found its way round Edith's waist, tightened a little in its clasp, and as he bent over her, he murmured in a low caressing tone, "My darling, you *are* my darling now, Edith;" but this was all.

She, poor girl, was looking very fagged and overdone, and her cheeks had flushed to a bright crimson, from excitement and other causes.

"I shan't let you talk any more now," said Harry presently, with a certain show of authority; "you know Linctus said you were to keep very quiet."

"Yes, and I was to avoid everything like excitement," she answered with her old

saucy smile, "and very nicely I have obeyed his orders, it seems to me."

"Be *quiet!*" said Harry, "I want to persuade myself that it's all true."

After that there was silence between them for some few minutes, though Harry's eyes in the meantime did duty instead of his tongue.

Edith grew a little nervous and shy under his admiring gaze, and to avoid the necessity of looking at him, she began almost unconsciously toying with the fingers of his burnt hand.

Even her light touch gave him exquisite pain. He bore it bravely as long as he could, but at last he was obliged to cry for mercy.

"Edith," he said, "do you know you are hurting me awfully? Burnt fingers were never meant even for your dear little hands to play with. There, dear, don't look so horrified; I know you didn't mean to hurt me, and I don't want to frighten you away. I only meant to suggest something else in-

stead. Suppose," he added, bending over her, and speaking almost in a whisper, "suppose just for once." The sentence was never finished, at least it was finished in a fashion of Harry's own, without the help of words. But whether his "just once" might not have extended itself to just twice or three times must remain for evermore an open question, for at that moment the door was thrown violently open, and little Fanny Price rushed in, in a perfect paroxysm of grief.

"Oh, Aunt Edith!" the poor child gasped out amidst her sobs, and then suddenly catching sight of her uncle, she transferred her attentions to him. "Uncle Harry, Uncle Harry ! say it isn't true ! it's too bad, I *can't* bear it !"

Uncle Harry drew the little sobbing mortal within his arms—it spoke something for his temper that he could bear such an interruption just then. "Hush, Fanny," he said a little sternly, for the child's grief was growing hysterical and required check-

ing with a strong hand, "don't cry like that, or you will make Aunt Edith ill. Tell me what you mean ; what is it you can't bear?"

"Oh Uncle Harry dear, don't go away, don't go and be shot. Oh dear, what shall I do?"

It appeared that Fanny had just heard of her uncle's projected journey to the seat of war.

Harry could not help giving Edith a curious little smile over the child's head. "Be quiet, little one," he said, laying his hand upon her shoulder and forcing her to keep still. "Crying like this can't do any good, and wouldn't keep me from being shot if I were to go. But I'm not gone yet, and perhaps I may stop at home after all."

Then Edith sat upright on her sofa, and took the matter into her own hands. "Come here, Fanny, and I will tell you, something," she said ; and taking the little girl into her arms, she let her finish out her sobs upon her shoulder. "There's nothing to cry

about any more, Uncle Harry is not going to the Crimea at all, not now ; you and I can't spare him, can we, dear ?”

And so the matter was finally settled.

## CHAPTER VII.

“AND a sweet set of blind old owls you all were not to find it out before,” was Mrs. Laura Price’s not over-polite observation when she came back an hour or two afterwards, and a breathless recital of all that had happened during her absence was poured into her ear by her enraptured and excited sister. “Why, I should have thought any one with their wits about them, could have seen long ago how things were going on. Tom and I settled it all between us the very first night we ever saw them together. A nice mess you would have made of it too, Mrs. Muddle, if I had let you interfere,” she added, bestowing a second kiss upon the much enduring Minnie. She, too,

was delighted with the turn things had taken, and vented her enthusiasm upon her sister, there being nobody else at hand just then to be kissed.

“I have a piece of news to tell you in return,” Mrs. Price continued presently. “Oakley Grange is to be shut up for six months at least. Mrs. Armytage is going to Cheltenham till the summer, and Master Ralph took himself off by express train this morning, for London, *en route* for the Crimea. But whether this is also a piece of the fair Edith’s handiwork, this deponent sayeth not.”

The young lady in question blushed very consciously when the intelligence was imparted to her the next day at lunch-time (Nurse Fullalove having swooped down upon her patient as her lawful prey, and carried her off to bed when the dressing bell rang the night before).

It did not improve matters when Harry, who *happened* to be sitting next to her, whispered in her ear, “It puts one in mind

of the old nursery legend about 'this pig went to market and this pig stopped at home,' eh, Edith? And as in that ancient chronicle, it seems to me that the fellow who stops at home is decidedly going to have the best of it. Don't you think so?"

Edith gave him no direct answer. "Poor Ralph," she murmured very sadly, and her eyes filled with tears. She rallied however in a minute or two, and looking up at him she said in a low tone, while her lips quivered with suppressed fun, "I thought, Harry, you said it was no light thing would stop you from going to the Crimea, and after all it was a *light thing* that made you change your mind, you know, because it was a lucifer match!"

The small witticism had been irresistible it seemed, in her still excited state of mind, but the next moment she was heartily ashamed of herself for having been able to joke on such a subject.

She had risen from the table as she spoke,

leaving him still sitting there in a state of helpless indignation, and pretending to scowl ferociously. He took his revenge when lunch was over, and they were left alone in the room.

"How about a certain sisterhood at Enderleigh, which I've heard tell of," he asked, getting up, and lounging leisurely towards her as she stood by the fireplace. "Are the poor Sisters to do for themselves as well as they can, if their superior chooses to back out of the business?"

"Oh poor things, they must migrate elsewhere, or put up with you as an *inferior*," she retorted.

The next instant she flashed upon him with one of her sunniest smiles.

"How about a certain journey somebody once thought of taking to Timbuctoo?"

"What on earth do you mean? Who ever talked of going to Timbuctoo?"

"Oh, nobody in particular—only you."

"*Edith*," (this indignantlly), "I go to

Timbuctoo, you are talking in riddles ; explain yourself, you Sphinx. What the dickens should I go to that part of the world for ?”

“ To get out my way, I believe,” she replied very demurely, but turning her head away, to hide her quivering lips.

“ What *do* you mean ? I never told you such a thing, I can swear.”

“ Don’t swear, pray. You never told me such a thing certainly, though you did tell me a good many funny things one night at Königswinter ; but I heard you say so all the same.”

“ Mysteries upon mysteries ! you know a great deal more than you ought to know, Miss Vivian, it seems to me. I believe you deal in the occult sciences, or have been taking lessons in spirit-rapping on the sly. Edith, let me look into your eyes and see if there is anything uncanny about them.”

But Edith declined to have her eyes looked into just then, and so he contented himself by taking possession of her hand

and pretending to examine it with some curiosity.

“There is one enigma I particularly wish to have solved,” he said, when he had finished up by trying the effect of his lips upon it, “and that is, how you came to know me in such a hurry last year, at Bonn, when I never recognized you in the least?”

“Oh,” exclaimed Edith laughing, “that’s my secret. Don’t ask any questions, sir, and you won’t be told any stories.”

She told him nevertheless, yielding to a gentle pressure on his part, and he nearly laughed himself into a fit, before she came to an end of her story. There was something so inexpressibly ludicrous, in having his own words, and even his own tricks of voice and manner, brought up against him, as it were, after all those months.

“Edith, my own darling,” he exclaimed, when they had sobered down again a little, and as he spoke he contrived to insinuate his

arm round her waist, "to think that I might have lost you after all. How strange that we should have gone on misunderstanding each other for so long."

"I don't know about misunderstanding each other," she answered, giving her head a little toss, and shaking herself free from his arm. "It seems to me you did most of that." It was thus she took her petty revenge for all the suspense he had made her bear.

"Harry," she said presently, in a graver tone, and coming nearer to him again, "I want you to tell me something. Does your father know?"

"Know what?" he asked, with a most provoking air of unconsciousness.

"About — last night I mean," she answered blushing.

"Oh, about—last night. No, he doesn't know anything as yet. It was thought better not to tell him before he went to bed, for fear he should not sleep, and he was late in coming down to-day. I was to tell him

after lunch, and I mean to do so now, if you will *ever* let me go."

"How pleased he will be," she said, blushing still more deeply, and hanging down her head.

"Yes, that's the worst of it," exclaimed the young man ungraciously; "I don't suppose he'll forbid the banns."

"Oh Harry, you bad boy, how can you be so rude? I can understand your feelings, though; but I don't see why we should begrudge the poor old gentleman his little triumph, seeing it happens to chime in with our own arrangements at the same time. Now go, sir, if you please, for I must write to aunt Fanny before post-time."

After that she would have him stay no longer. He lingered on for a little while, hoping to extort from her a more tender farewell; but she kept her head resolutely turned the other way, and at last he was obliged to go away without having gained his point. Indulgences of that kind were not to be granted too often, it seemed.

Edith sat down to write as soon as he had left her, but she soon found that to break the intelligence of her engagement to her aunt was by no means so easy a task as she had anticipated. It was rather hard to have to come down from her pedestal, as it were, and to confess to her Aunt Fanny, of all people, that the 'wondrous wise' resolutions she had so long indulged in, had all melted away before the very first breath of temptation; and that for the future she must, for consistency's sake, entertain the same ideas about marrying and giving in marriage as any other girl. Edith was not a person to do anything by halves; she would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and even now she was quite as ready to laugh herself at the sudden downfall of all her castles in the air, as anybody else could have been; but in this case there was another reason which made it a little difficult for her to break the ice.

The news of her engagement would be to

the old aunt to whom she was writing, virtually a notice to quit the house, which that good lady might, perhaps, fairly have reckoned on as being her home to the end of her days. Edith knew Harry well enough to be certain that the interference of any third person in their married life would be peculiarly distasteful to him, particularly as the person in this case was one of whose infirmities of temper he had no doubt been in the habit of hearing very exaggerated reports ; and even if for her sake he would have been willing to consent to such an arrangement, Edith herself would not have wished her aunt to remain. From the day (whenever or if ever that day should come) that Harry took her back to Enderleigh as his bride, she was determined that her husband should be whole and sole master in her old home.

“ Like Alexander he shall reign,  
And he shall reign alone,”

she said to herself proudly, “and if within six months after we are married, I have not

taught him to forget that all I have is not his *very* own, I believe I shall be a miserable woman for life."

Aunt Fanny would necessarily be a fatal hindrance to her generous scheming; and yet it did seem a little hard that the poor old lady should have to make a new home for herself at her time of life,—so hard indeed that Edith could not bear the thought of her brooding alone over the coming separation; and it ended by a letter being dispatched, which contained no word or hint of the subject which, of course, was uppermost in her own mind. Perhaps she would be able to write better on the morrow; but the morrow came, and the task was as difficult as ever; and at last she decided to break the news to her aunt by word of mouth, after her return to Enderleigh.

This was not long delayed. Nothing would induce Miss Vivian to remain at Haughton more than two days longer than she had originally intended. I think she found her uncle's and Minnie's raptures almost too

oppressive after the first excitement was over, and she longed to be back again in the less constrained atmosphere of her own home. Even Harry did not press her to prolong her stay ; but then he had opportunely called to mind that he had neglected his father's old friends, the Lorrimers, who lived under the shadow of the New Forest trees, and within an easy ride of Enderleigh Priory, very much of late ; and as he had already written to say he would pay them a long promised visit in about a fortnight's time, he was not looking forward to a very lengthened separation.

So Edith, 'the affianced,' went home to Enderleigh ; and on the very first night of her return, when tea was over, and they were sitting side by side in the oak-panelled library with the bay window, which overlooked the flower garden, she knelt down, and putting her arms round her aunt's neck, told her as coherently as she could the story she had to tell. And lo ! when she had thus made the first bold step forward, the

difficulty which had seemed like a mountain in the distance, dwindled down into the veriest mole-hill on a nearer approach.

“Don’t ask me to stay with you, my dear,” Aunt Fanny said, when Edith in a weak moment, overcome by the discovery of a depth of tenderness in her old aunt’s heart of which she had never dreamt till then, was about to suggest that after all perhaps they need not part; “because I shan’t do anything of the kind; young folks are best left to themselves when they are first married. Let them quarrel as much as they like; if they love each other, they are sure to make it up again. But if there is any third person to step between them, she is likely to go to the wall herself, or else to make matters fifty times worse. That’s my opinion, and always will be;” and the everlasting old yellow cap gave an emphatic nod as she spoke. “But don’t you fret about me, dearie. Thanks to your good mother that’s gone, I’ve enough, and more than enough to live upon; and there’s a home too waiting

for me whenever I'm ready to go to it. I always knew it would come to this some day, for I couldn't expect to keep you to myself all my life, whatever you might say. And it might have been much worse to leave you than it is, for, thank God, I have never heard anything but good as yet of the man you are going to marry."

"And now, sit down, child, on your own low chair," the old lady went on, with an odd sort of trembling in her voice, "if you are not too tired; put your head here on my lap, if you like, only don't look at me, and I will tell you where the home is that's waiting for me, and whose children they are that I'm going to live with and take care of, when you get a husband of your own to take care of you. Did you ever hear that I was going to be married once when I was as young as you, Edith? I don't suppose you ever did; for there were very few who ever knew it, and most of those are dead and gone. Lie still, child, there's nothing so very startling in the fact. But there, you

young selfish lovers,—I don't mean you in particular, my dear; but all lovers are selfish more or less,—always seem to think that old people have got no hearts at all, or if they have, that they must have been shrivelled up like the mummies in the British Museum for years and years before you were born. So I suppose you are like the rest of them, and very much astonished to hear that I've ever been in love. But it's the truth nevertheless. I was going to be married, I tell you, Edith, when I was about your age, to a man I loved as dearly as you seem to love your fine young Harry. *Loved*, do I say? what am I talking about? I love him now, like the old fool that I am, though he's been dead and buried these fifteen years, and was married to another woman for nearly twenty years before that. His name was Tom Halliday. You will have to hear it some day, so you may as well hear it now; but, dear, how strange it does seem, to say that name out loud again after all these years. I dare say you never guessed whose hair it

was in the locket I have worn round my neck night and day for well nigh forty years, and which I shall wear there still I hope, when I'm lying in the grave. Well, it is Tom's, my dear. Tom's hair, when he was young and bonnie. It was all brown and curly then, though the last time I saw him, it was as white as the snow itself."

The old lady paused for a moment here, as if struggling with an emotion she did not choose to give way to; but Edith never once moved her head or looked up in her aunt's face. She only took hold of the poor old withered hand, which was toying nervously with her hair, and kissed it softly once or twice.

"He was not a bad man, Edith," Miss Neville went on; "but he was very weak, and a weak man can be as cruel as a wicked one to the woman he loves. He loved me more than he ever loved any one else in the world, and yet, when he said good bye to me before he went to Australia to seek his fortune, as he called it, and promised to come

back in less than three years and make me his wife, my heart misgave me as to whether he would ever keep his word. His relations had been against our engagement from the first ; I was always a plain woman, and had not a penny to bless myself with, beyond what I could earn. They thought Tom might have looked higher, and so he might. Well, as soon as he was gone, I took a situation as daily governess to teach the little that I knew to three young children, meaning to lay by every shilling that was paid me against Tom came home, and we set up housekeeping together.

This only made matters worse in the eyes of his family. There was one of his sisters who had always hated me worse than the rest, and you may suppose I did not love her much in return. She was determined, if possible, to put an end to what she called "the nonsense between us," and she had her wish. May God forgive her for what she did ! I said *I* never would ; but she died a few years afterwards, when her first baby

was born ; and from her death-bed she sent me a piteous message, imploring me to forgive her, and I tried hard to do it then, though I'm not sure whether I ever succeeded. I'll tell you what she did, Edith. She wrote long letters by every mail to Tom, and kept on telling him all sorts of lying stories about me, taunting him over and over again for keeping faith with an ugly woman in England who had not a penny, while he might have the pick of all the rich girls in Sydney, if he chose. And at last, when a cousin of mine, whose name was Fanny also, a woman he had never seen in his life, happened to get engaged, she had the wickedness to write out and tell him that "Fanny Neville" was going to be married to somebody else, intending him to believe that she meant me ; and, like the weak foolish fellow that he was, he took her at her word. He wrote me home a miserable letter, full of bitter broken-hearted reproaches, and bidding me farewell for ever. But my answer, containing a passionate in-

dignant denial of the falsehood which she had told him, did not reach him in time. There were no telegraphs then, and it took months for letters to get to Australia in those days. And so the very next news I heard of Tom Halliday was, that he had married a rich handsome girl, who had made a dead set at him ever since the first day he set foot in Sydney,—married her, loving *me* in his heart still all the while, as I do believe.

“And so, my dear,” Aunt Fanny continued, after a moment’s pause, in a harder tone, “that’s the beginning and end of my love story. I had one or two offers after that, but I never could care for anybody except Tom, and so that is why I’m an old maid to this day. And a cross old maid too, Edie, I’m afraid; for I was neither an angel nor a saint, and it made my temper worse than it was before. Your mother, dear soul, knew all about it; and she put up with all my ill humours without ever giving me so much as an angry word. And now

I've told you the truth, you'll find it easier to forgive your old aunt for all the cross things she has said to you so many many times, won't you, dearie ?"

Once more the harsh voice trembled on the very verge of tears, and, almost breaking down herself, Edith lifted her head from its drooping posture, and, throwing her arms round her aunt's neck, could only kiss her again and again in silent sympathy.

"But you have something else to tell me, Aunt Fanny," she said presently ; "you have not told me yet about the home that's waiting for you, though I think I can guess whose children they are, that you are going to take care of."

"No more I have, my dear, but I'm coming to that part now," said Aunt Fanny in her natural voice.

"Tom never wrote again after that. Why should he, after he had put such an impassable barrier between us ? but I used to hear of him now and then ; and after ten years he came home to England, a very rich

man, with his wife and two children. I did not see him then for a long time, in fact I never saw him so long as he was rich. But he did not keep his fortune many years. Tom was always of a speculative turn of mind. Weak men often are; and when they are bachelors their speculations often end by marrying a rich wife. It did not *end* thus in his case. He was not content it seemed with the money he already possessed, and unfortunately having no legitimate business, he dabbled in stocks and shares to try to make it more. He invested largely in Joint Stock Banks, became director of several railways, and more than one mining speculation. And one morning he woke up to find himself a ruined man, and what was worse, a man with a damaged reputation. Then it was that we met again. I was able to be of some little use to him—never mind how—and from that day we went on meeting from time to time. I used to go and visit his family occasionally at the little cottage he had taken in the outskirts of London. We

never spoke of the old times ; but I don't suppose we had either of us forgotten them in the least. His wife might, or might not, have guessed at the old tie there had been between us. I don't think he had ever told her ; yet she seemed to mistrust and dislike me from the first, and there was no love lost between us, as you may suppose. She had been a vain, spoilt woman all her days ; and what with her reproaches and ill humours she led poor Tom a sad life after his breakdown. He, poor fellow, never held up his head again, but gradually drooped more and more, till at last he sank into a confirmed invalid. When he was dying,—for he died, Edith, within a very few years after that,—he sent for me one day and asked me to befriend his two poor fatherless children when he was gone, “for his sake,” he said, “though he had not deserved it of me.” He never made any other allusion than this to our old love ; but he looked at me out of his great haggard eyes as he spoke, and I knew that, old woman as I was, I

held the first place in his heart even then. Perhaps it was very wicked of me, but I could not help feeling glad. I promised to do what he asked,—and I have done it. I have never lost sight of those two poor girls—women I ought to call them now,—though on your account, Edith, I have not been able to visit them very often. Their mother died soon after Tom, leaving them alone in the world. They were not very young, but they were very helpless. And then one of them, the elder, married badly. She was a widow within six months, and, what is worse, a cripple, for a fall out of a pony carriage had made her lame for life. She went to live with her other sister, who had opened a little school. This did not succeed very well, and after a little time they took a larger house near London, with the view of letting part of it. This plan has answered better. I have had business in London sometimes, as you know, Edith. Well, my business has generally been to see them, and hear how they were

getting on. So I have seen them from time to time, and last year, when I was at Aix, (you would not have been any the wiser if I had told you before,) they were staying there at the same time with some friends. We met every day, and learnt to love each other better and better; and it was arranged between us then, that when you married, —as I knew you would sooner or later, whatever you might say,—I should go and live with them, and we should all keep house together. My money will be quite enough for us to live upon, and poor Jessie, that's the young one, will have no need to slave any longer as a daily governess, but will be able to keep more at home and look after her crippled sister. And so, my dear, it is in their little house at Bayswater, that the home I told you about is waiting for me whenever I'm ready to go to it, and it's Tom's children who have promised to love me and take care of me for the rest of my days, when the time comes for me to lose my pet."

The poor old lady quite broke down when she came to an end of this long story, and straining her niece to her heart in a warm embrace, they finished by having a good cry in each other's arms. Edith's tears were in a great measure happy ones, for her aunt's disclosure had lifted a great weight off her mind, and yet she could not help saying, with a half-reproachful smile, "You love them better than you love me, auntie."

"No I don't," Aunt Fanny answered bluntly ; "at any rate, not yet. But even if I did, Edith,"—the young lady thus addressed hung her head and blushed,— "even if I did, my dear, if you don't love your Harry more than anybody else in the whole world you have no business to be going to marry him ; and so I tell you."

Edith could find no very convenient answer to this observation, so she wisely let it pass. Presently Aunt Fanny rose from her chair, and wiped away the last tears from her eyes.

“Edith,” she said, in her old harsh voice, “your dear mother knew all about Tom Halliday and me, as I told you before ; and you know now ; but it must not go any farther, mind ! You are not married yet, and so there is no need for you to talk any stuff about having no secrets from your husband. Do you hear, child ?”

The ‘child’ heard, and promised to obey.

“But you need not be afraid of trusting Harry,” she said, half resenting the implied affront which had been put upon her lover, “nobody could be more kind than he is.”

“Oh, of course you think so. I know all about that sort of thing,” was the old lady’s answer, “and some of these days when you are married I don’t so much mind your telling him ; but not before. I wouldn’t have those people at Haughton gossiping about my love affairs for all the Harrys that ever were born !”

## CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Miss Vivian had been engaged about a month, Harry Neville rode over to Enderleigh one day, from Mrs. Lorrimer's house near Lyndford, where he was staying, at an earlier hour than usual, and found Edith still in the breakfast-room, looking over her accounts.

"Edith," he said abruptly, as he still stood in front of her, after they had exchanged greetings, "I have come to ask you to lend me some money."

She started up and put both her hands in his. "Oh Harry, how kind of you," she said.

He looked at her for a moment, oh, so proudly! "My darling, I knew you would

say so ; but you can't conceive what hard work it has been to ask you."

"Naughty proud boy !"

"I don't know, I'm sure, about the pride, it seems to me that *that* has been pretty well knocked out of me. I'm tolerably tamed, of late, I fancy. 'Rarey-fied,' in fact. If any man had told me six months ago that I should do such a thing as this, I believe I should have knocked him down. As it was, I very nearly turned back again when I had come half way, though I rode over this morning for the express purpose of asking you."

"What good would that have done you ?"

"None whatever. Only I have never been used to asking favours all my life, and it goes awfully against the grain to do it now."

"I suppose I may take it as a compliment, then, that you have contrived to ask this one of me," she said, bending down her head to hide a smile of irrepressible

triumph which was playing about her lips.

“I suppose you may.”

“Not that I look upon it in the light of a favour,” she added, quickly, lest he might mistake her meaning.

“Don’t you? Opinions may differ about that. However, favour or no favour, it was hard work to screw my courage up to the asking point, as I told you before; harder work, even, than it was on another occasion you may remember, about a month ago. If it had not been for seeing you sitting here, and looking so business-like, my pluck would have failed me at the last moment, I do believe; and I should have gone away without saying a word about it, after all.”

“It would have been very unkind of you if you had,” she said, making a little ‘*moue*.’

“You have an odd notion of kindness and unkindness, Edie,” he answered, sitting down beside her, and touching her hair softly with his hand; “tell me why it would have been unkind of me to have

gone away without asking you to lend me a whole lot of money ?”

“Because you would have deprived me of a very great pleasure, and because you would only have had to go to those nasty Jews instead,” she answered, still pouting.

“Come, come,” he said, with quite a natural laugh this time, “I’m not so hard-up as all that. I don’t suppose I should have gone to the ‘nasty Jews’ in any case. I can tell you as much as this, I don’t want this money to pay any debts of my own.”

“I never supposed you did ; but it would make no difference if you had.”

“It ought to make all the difference, Miss Vivian. If you make such rash assertions before the general public, it will come to the conclusion that women become very foolish when they are in love.”

Edith vouchsafed no answer whatever to this last observation. She had been busy during the last few moments opening her desk, and taking out her cheque-book, and now she sat, pen in hand, with a blank

cheque lying before her, waiting to begin business at once.

“How much money do you want, Harry?” she asked, looking up at him with glittering eyes and a saucy smile.

Either he fancied he detected a slight touch of ridicule in her manner, or else he then for the first time thoroughly realized the practical bearings of the request he had made; but at any rate something seemed to affect him very unpleasantly. His whole manner changed in an instant; and, springing up from his chair, he walked to the window, and stood looking out into the garden not in the very best of humours. Presently he turned round and faced her again. “Just put that piece of paper in the fire, Edith, and forget all we have been talking about, if you *can*,” he exclaimed, pettishly. He was hot-tempered by nature, and the least suspicion of ridicule roused the old Adam within him at a moment’s notice. “I believe I have been demented this whole morning; at any rate, I have

been making myself supremely ridiculous. We have had enough of that, so now let us change the subject. How did you get home yesterday after I left you? I was very sorry I could not ride back with you, but you know it was not my fault."

Edith never moved her position in the least, but she raised her eyes and fixed them calmly on his face. "Harry, how much money do you want?" she repeated, in exactly the same tone, and without taking the slightest notice of his interruption.

"Not a farthing, I tell you. Because I have made a fool of myself once, there is no need for me to go on doing so. It was very mean and cowardly of me ever to dream of asking you such a thing, and so there's an end of it."

Then Edith got up from her chair, and, walking up to his side, linked her arm in his.

"There is not an end of it as far as I am concerned," she said; "and it was not mean or cowardly, but very kind and brave

of you to do what you have done. Indeed I believe your chief object in asking me this ; was to make me very happy. So don't be tiresome, Harry, dear ; but come and sit down again, and tell me how much money you want me to give you ? ”

It was impossible for him to resist her pleading, and he suffered himself to be led back to his old chair beside her own ; but, sitting down again, he put his arms on the table, and covering his face with his hands, answered still very moodily,

“ I want an immense sum ; far more than I have any right to ask for, or you to give.”

“ Harry, you *shall* not say such things. Do you want more than £600 ? ” she added, in a more matter-of-fact tone ; “ I could let you have that at once, for I have as much, or perhaps a little more, lying at my bankers in Salisbury at the present moment ; but if that is not enough, I am afraid you will have to wait till my next quarter's allowance comes due.”

Captain Neville burst out laughing, restored to good humour in spite of himself. "My dear girl, I am not thinking of buying an estate, or going into business on my own account, so you have rather overshot the mark. Your ideas of money matters are on such a gigantic scale that they sound quite alarming to a pauper like me. No, I do not want so much as that."

"How much then?" she asked, this time without looking up at him, while her pen still hovered over the paper.

Down went his head on to his hand again. "It's of no use, Edith, I cannot tell you," he said, pushing back his chair impatiently, preparatory to making another stride across to the window.

But Edith's hand on his arm stopped him this time.

"Don't be so cross, Harry," she pleaded ; and then leaning over towards him till her head almost touched his shoulder, she added, in the most bewitching *sotto voce*, "If you can't tell me in words, you can

tell me *in another way* the number of hundreds you want;—that is, if you like.”

“Oh, I can, can I? Well; then I do like.”

“Hundreds, mind, not pounds!” she repeated, retreating a little, and blushing rosy red, as she noticed the alacrity with which he was about to avail himself of her permission.

“Unfair limitation!” he exclaimed, laughing. He took no unfair advantage, however. Bending over her he pressed his lips softly on her forehead once, and no more.

“Is *that* all?” she asked, a little contemptuously.

“Do you want another kiss?” was his reply.

“That’s nothing to the purpose, sir. Do you want another hundred?”

“No, I don’t; but—Edith, I *do* want another kiss.”

Edith only stooped her head lower and lower over her desk; and getting no other answer from him, filled in the cheque at last for £150.

“ Extravagant child ! ” he muttered, looking over her shoulder as she wrote, “ is that the way you always do business, I wonder, giving people half as much again as they ask. I must have ‘ a little one in,’ Edith, on account of that extra ‘ pony.’ A pretty morning’s work I have been making of it ! ” he exclaimed, the moment after, in quite a different tone ; “ to think that I should have come to you of all people to lend me this ; and the worst of it is, that I can’t tell you what I want it for.”

Her face fell just a very little when he told her this, but he could not see it, as her head was turned away. “ Never mind, I can trust you,” she said, looking up at him with one of her sunny smiles, and he took the payment he had demanded for the ‘ pony,’ on the spot. Even then I believe Miss Vivian still considered herself the obliged party.

She made her escape to the other side of the room, directly after, on pretence of making up the fire ; and then her com-

panion proceeded in true lover-like fashion to overhaul the contents of her writing-desk.

“Ha, ha!” he exclaimed, with a shout, “here’s a prize! ‘*My jingo!*’ as our little Dutch friend at Patna used to say. I’ve found something worth having at last.”

Edith turned round, and discovered him in possession of an old account-book of hers, which he was flourishing with a great show of triumph over his head.

“Now, Harry, you thief, put that down directly,” she said, laughing; “you have no right to pry into my secrets in that way, at any rate not yet.”

She went up to him, and laying one hand on his shoulder, tried to reach over to the account-book with the other. But he held it at arm’s length, and keeping her back with some pretence of force, proceeded very composedly to read out some of the entries he found therein.

“‘How I spent my money last year,’” he began quoting, in a sententious tone;

“that’s a thing I should uncommonly like to know.”

“There’s no objection to your knowing, I’m sure, as you *are* so inquisitive,” Edith replied, making a virtue of necessity, and accepting her fate with a certain amount of resignation ; “I don’t suppose there is anything in that book I should be ashamed of your seeing,” she added, sitting down again.

“Let’s see how much you spent, and whether you managed to get into debt, first of all,” he said, turning towards the end of the book. “‘Balance at my bankers on the last day of December, £916.’ Well done ! I call that good management.”

“It would have been larger, I have no doubt, only I was very extravagant last year, and spent a great deal of money on an expensive foreign tour.”

“Ah, but that was money well spent,” he retorted, “because it procured you the pleasure of my acquaintance.”

“A-t-on jamais entendu ?” she murmured,

under her breath. "What will your conceit suggest to you next, I wonder."

"What's this?" he went on, "'Dress and personal expenses, £100.' Edith, you don't mean to tell me that you only spend £100 a-year on your dress?"

"And quite enough, too, I should hope. At least, it has always been enough as yet. I have Mamma's diamonds and things, you know, when I want to be 'a great swell.' Perhaps I may have to adopt a more gorgeous style of attire, by-and-by, when I am Mrs. Henry Neville."

He gave her an amused sidelong look which brought a crimson blush to her cheek. She had unwittingly betrayed herself; for the name had slipped so glibly off her tongue, that it was self-evident she must have practised it previously in private.

"Here's another entry on which I wish to be enlightened, if you please. I see the sum of £620 stands first on the list of your expenses for the past year, and the same sum is entered at the beginning of the

month of January in this present year. There is a curious coincidence about that which I should like to have explained. What does it mean ?”

“Can’t you guess ?” she asked, softly, bending down her head, and toying with a paper-knife she held in her hand.

The sum represents about the tenth part of your income, if I have heard the amount of that income stated correctly. Has that anything to do with it ?”

“Perhaps it has.”

“Do you mean to say that that is what you give away every year ?”

There was no answer.

“You may make me believe what you like about your dress, Edith, I know very little about that sort of thing, except that you are clever and not extravagant. But you *won’t* make me believe in a hurry that £620 can cover the amount of your charity expenses in the course of the year. Why I know you sent a cool hundred, more than once, to those poor fellows at Scutari last

autumn, and I see your initials down for no small sums in nearly every subscription list in the 'Times.' All that walks into hard cash, let me tell you. And then just look at your almshouses and schools on this very estate; they can't be kept up under a pretty penny! You gave away much more than £600 last year, at any rate, or I'm very much mistaken, young lady."

Edith did not offer to contradict him; she still sat in her stooping attitude, playing with the point of her silver paper-cutter. "I suppose I may do as I like with mine own," she murmured, "without being cross-questioned by any curious cousins. Harry, I will tell you what it all means," she added, the moment after, raising her head, and speaking in quite a different tone, "It means just this. That sum of money is as you said as nearly as possible the tenth part of my income. I won't say I have not given away more than that for the last few years, perhaps I have; but that £600 has always been devoted and set aside

for charitable purposes. It is God's tenth," she added, reverently, "to be used in His service and for His poor. It always has been so, ever since I can remember; in mamma's time, and even before that, when my grandmother was alive. And Harry, dear, you will let it be so in the future, will you not?"

Harry Neville looked at her for a moment, without speaking, then he lifted the hand she had laid once again on his arm, and just touched it with his lips, as if he were setting a seal to the compact between them.

"Of course I will, my darling," he said.

He did not go on to tell her that married or unmarried, she should have the whole and sole disposal of her own income, as many a weaker or less conscientious man might have done, and she liked him fifty times the better for not making any such empty professions.

At this juncture Edith thought it necessary, or, at any rate, expedient, to make

another onslaught on the fire, which did not require poking in the least; but before she came back to the table again she found her cousin had got into fresh mischief, as she called it. This time he had been foraging in her desk, and laid his hands upon a piece of blank paper, upon which he was rapidly dotting down some memoranda with the pen she had laid aside.

She came and stood behind him, and looked quietly over his shoulder till he had almost finished; but before he could sign his name to the document she seized the paper out of his hands, and tore it into twenty little pieces.

“Upon my word! there’s a pretty display of temper,” said Harry, coolly. “Now, my dear Edith, do you know that your hasty conduct has made it necessary for me to write that all over again?”

“I know nothing of the kind,” she retorted, petulantly. “Do you want to insult me by writing down such a piece of nonsense as that?”

“I don’t think your lawyer would call it nonsense, that I should give you an acknowledgment for the money you have lent me this morning.”

“You will make me angry in a minute, Harry,” she said, looking half ready to cry. “What has my lawyer or anybody’s lawyer to do between you and me? No one, not even your father, has any right now to interfere with the way I choose to spend my money. I might put my five-pound notes into the fire as fast as I got them from the bank if I liked, and he could say nothing against it, unless, indeed, he thought fit to shut me up in a lunatic asylum.”

“Suppose you were to die?” Harry suggested, pleasantly; “your executors would not know where to look for that £150.”

“Thank you kindly,” she answered, laughing, in spite of herself, “but I don’t mean to die if I can help it. I am going to be married some day, I hope, and when that great event has taken place, what will

be the difference, sir, tell me, whether the money is yours or mine?"

Captain Neville laid his head upon his hand, and relapsed into the moody stage once more.

"That's the worst part of it," he said, presently. "I dare say you will think me a great fool, Edith, but I can't help that. I should think myself something worse than a fool, a scoundrel, in fact, if we were to be married, before I had paid you back that money."

Edith made no answer, only her cheek flushed a little.

"I have no doubt of being able to do so before Easter. I gave orders a fortnight ago for the sale of my commission, but the money for that, belongs of right to my father. The poor old governor pinched himself sadly, I find now, to purchase my company for me, and I can't do less than pay him back when it is in my power. But other sums are owing to me before long, and you may be sure I shall pay the money into your

banker's hands the very moment it comes into my own. I am safe to have it before Easter, I think ; but if not, Edith, I am afraid we must wait." He looked up to her for an answer.

"As you please, she replied, coldly. "It is not for me to urge you to change your decision."

"Now, you are angry with me."

"No, not angry, only sorry." The tears were in her eyes. "Very sorry that you are so proud. Harry, dear, I do think you are too proud about this."

"I don't fancy you would think so, my darling, if you could just put yourself in my place for a moment. I know somebody else who can be proud, too, at times. *Can't* you understand that it is one thing for me to marry you as a penniless man, but quite another thing to marry you in the character of your debtor?"

She was silent for a moment. "I have another plan, Harry!" she exclaimed, brightening up again, and beginning to play with

the flower in his button-hole. "You were talking about 'ponies' just now, and that just puts me in mind that your dear old horse Rob Roy was lamed by the groom that night he rode over to Bristol in such a hurry to fetch my doctor. Never mind how I came to know it. I do know it, and that's enough. Now listen, dear. I have never given you anything yet. - When this money comes back into your hands, whether before or after Easter, keep it, and buy yourself a new hunter, as a present from me. Don't be disagreeable, Harry, but say 'yes' at once."

But Harry *was* disagreeable, and shook his head, though he looked at her for a few moments with the same proud look he had bestowed upon her before.

"Edith, you are an empress by nature, and a regular Jesuit at an argument, but it won't do. You cannot persuade me, against my own better judgment, that it can be a right or an honourable thing for a man to marry his own creditor."

Edith sighed. "You are hopelessly ob-

stinate, then?" she asked, letting go the flower."

"Just so," he answered, laughing. "When you and I have gone through a certain ceremony which involves the giving and receiving of a ring, you shall give me as many 'ponies' and other quadrupeds too, as ever you like; but until then, I only ask for leave to ride my own high horse."

"By all means, if it pleases you," she said, in a hard voice, from which all the playful petulance had died away. "It is a kind of exercise which seems at all times to give you peculiar gratification. Come in to the drawing-room now," she added, turning away; "it is time we went to look after Aunt Fanny."

Captain Neville gave his shoulders a slight shrug, and followed her in silence. It must be owned that his pride had been decidedly 'prickly' and provoking, and that Edith had some sort of right on her side, when she said to herself, as she had no scruple whatever in saying, that 'she did well to be angry' with him.

## CHAPTER IX.

WELL did the Apostle Paul say that ‘money is the root of all evil.’ It sometimes exercises its baneful influence over even the noblest natures ; over those even, who can by no means be ranked amongst its worshippers, but who, knowing the strength of its temptations, make a hard fight to resist its insidious power. It was so in this case. From the day on which Harry Neville asked his cousin to lend him that hundred pounds, a sort of cloud seemed to come and settle down between them. It was nothing very tangible. It did not amount to actual reserve on his part, or to distrust on hers ; but whatever it was, it was enough to poison the very source of their happiness, and to

destroy half the pleasure they had hitherto felt in each other's society.

What Edith had said that first day about Harry's *kindness* in coming to her to lend him the money, was quite true ; she had meant it when she said it, and she thought so still. Quite true, too, that she had told him she could trust him, though he never gave her the least clue as to what he intended to do with that money, and she did her best to believe that she *was* trusting him. Suspicion was so foreign to her real nature (she had been educated, not born to believe evil of her fellow creatures), that she made a hard fight now against the demon of distrust which was ready to take possession of her soul. But in spite of all her efforts, she did not quite succeed. The spirit was willing, but the poor human flesh was weak. Her heart was loyal, and never swerved from its allegiance. She believed in her affianced husband still, as one of the noblest of created beings, and yet it did seem a little hard that he should never have

told her what he wanted that money for. Curiosity might have had something to do with it, for Edith was by no means above the weakness common to her sex. It was a bad look out, too, for her married life, she thought, if Harry never intended to take her more into his confidence than this. She had found his pride far too 'prickly' from the first (from the first time they had met in England, at least); she was always hurting herself against it, as it seemed to her, and since that morning's work it had been worse than ever. When the deed had once been done, and the money given beyond recall, he seemed angry with himself that he had ever condescended to ask the favour; and poor Edith had to suffer, it appeared, for the false step he had made. If they had come to a downright quarrel, it might have had the effect of a sort of mental thunderstorm, and cleared the air up wonderfully; but the quarrel never came, and the cloud still hung over their heads and hearts.

This state of things went on for about a

fortnight, and then Harry's visit to the Lorrimers came to an end; his father wanted him back at Haughton for a little while.

Mr. and Mrs. Lorrimer were old friends of Sir Edward Neville's; had known Harry, indeed, ever since he was a child. He had been able to befriend their son, too, in some important way when they had met once in India during the Sikh campaign (he had a knack of befriending people, peculiar to himself), and now the old people did not seem to be able to do enough for him. Their hospitality happened to be particularly acceptable to him just then, and when he went away to Haughton it was an understood thing that he was to come back to them again at the beginning of Lent, and to spend as much of his time as he pleased at their house, until that momentous Easter week arrived, which had been fixed upon as the time for the wedding.

When it came to correspondence between the cousins, they got on together much better than when they were in the habit of meeting

in daily intercourse. There are many nice degrees and shades of coldness which are clearly discernible in a person's tone and manner, but which are too subtle to be easily perceived when it becomes a question of pen and paper. Besides, they had many things to write to each other about. Captain Neville's letters to his cousin could scarcely have come under the head of love-letters. There was plenty of tenderness in them. He was a true-hearted man, and so it could not be otherwise. But there was nothing in them which, if they had fallen into wrong hands, would have made the writer appear palpably ridiculous. He never once called Edith an angel, or wrote sonnets to his 'mistress's eyebrow' in bad rhyme and worse rhythm. He did not even tell her that he was expiring in cold misery, while away from her presence, and deprived of the sunshine of her smile.

I dare say a great many persons will argue from this that Harry Neville *could* not have been in love, but I beg to differ from them.

I am not one of those who think it necessary for a man to part company with his reasonable senses, because he happens to have lost his heart. Edith herself was of the same opinion, and liked her lover none the less because he did not fill his letters with sentimental rhapsodies.

About three weeks had slipped away since Harry's departure, and Miss Vivian in her secret soul was beginning to count the days, almost the hours, which must elapse before his return to Hampshire, when the monotony of her existence was varied by a dinner-party at Squire Tucker's, who lived at the Manor House in the neighbouring village of Kingswood.

It was rather a slow affair, formal and ceremonious to a degree. Edith went down to dinner with old Sir James Prattle, a great authority in the hunting-field, but not a very lively neighbour for a young lady at a dinner-party. He entertained her during the first three courses with eulogiums on Thorley's food for cattle, and during the

dessert, with the chances for and against Voltigeur being first favourite for the Derby after the next spring meeting.

After dinner it was worse. Mrs. Tucker was a kind-hearted sort of woman, but her ideas might be said to be bounded by the four walls of her nursery. She seated herself, when the ladies came up from the dining-room, on a sofa by another lady who was nearly as much baby-ridden as herself, and the two together commenced a low-toned, confidential conversation on the doings and sayings of their respective progeny.

Aunt Fanny almost went to sleep. Edith saw her head nod forward very ominously more than once, so she moved her seat, and took a chair close beside the old lady, so as to be ready to give her a friendly push if it became necessary.

In doing this she had placed herself immediately behind the conservatory door, which happened to be a little open, and she soon made the discovery that two ladies

of the party had strolled in there to look at the flowers, and were walking up and down and talking; moreover, that they were talking about her. She tried hard not to listen, and calling Mabel Tucker, an intelligent little girl of about Fanny Price's age, towards her, she began asking her about her white rabbits and fan-tail pigeons; but one of the ladies in the conservatory, old Lady Prattle, was very deaf, and her companion, a Miss Sharp, who was a methodistical mischief-making old maid, between whom and Miss Fanny Neville there was no love lost, had to speak in a very loud tone to make her ladyship hear. So, what between listening to little Mabel Tucker's discourse on the one hand, and to the snatches of conversation from the conservatory, which she could not help overhearing whenever the two ladies came near the door, poor Edith's brain became a little confused and bewildered. This was somewhat of the sort of thing which went on.

“So Miss Vivian is going to be married

at last," said Lady Prattle, in her deep bass voice.

"At *last*," thought Edith, and I was only one-and-twenty last June.

"Yes, poor thing," exclaimed Miss Sharp's shrill treble in reply; and then she sighed heavily.

Nevertheless, Lady Prattle had not been able to catch the words.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I said 'yes, poor thing,'" shouted Miss Sharp, and she gave a louder sigh than before.

"Why do you call her poor thing?" asked Lady Prattle sharply. "I don't see why she's to be pitied."

"Ah, well," Miss Sharp began, but Edith could hear no more, for the ladies had moved too far away. And then Mabel's voice came in 'obligato.'

"Oh, Miss Vivian, and what do you think? that naughty boy Percy put a lot of pepper in front of the hutches, and my poor little rabbits sneezed every time they went

in and out, and their poor little eyes were redder than ever all through the next day."

Edith laughed, as she was expected to do. At any other time she would have been much entertained with this description, but just then her attention was fully occupied by the effort to catch the next words which might come from the conservatory. She particularly wanted to know what business that horrid Miss Sharp had to call her "poor thing."

"Ah, well," the shrill voice repeated, as the ladies came once more within ear-shot, and Edith could well imagine the uplifting of the eyes, and the spiteful shrug of the shoulders, with which the words were accompanied,—“those sort of matches do turn out well sometimes, so we will hope this one will; they do say a reformed rake makes the best husband."

Edith, with her face on fire, almost started out of her chair, but she managed to control herself, and to listen to what Lady Prattle said in reply.

"But I never heard that this man she is going to marry was a rake," the old lady exclaimed. "My boy Sam thinks a great deal of him, and says he was always considered one of the finest officers in Bengal. And he's mostly right in what he says, is Sam."

"Bless your dear old heart for standing up for my Harry," Edith mentally ejaculated; "I'd give you a kiss without being asked for it next time I see you, if your chin were twice as 'scrubby' as it is."

Then the voices died away once more in the distance, and Mabel Tucker had her innings again.

"Percy is such a dreadful boy, Miss Vivian. We call him Percy the Pickle in the nursery. Uncle Walter gave him a beautiful new paint-box the other day, and what do you think the very first thing he did with it was?"

"I really can't imagine," said Edith, trying to seem interested.

“ Why, he took it into the farmyard with him, and catching hold of Ponto, our poor old white dog, he painted him all over in what he called a pretty pattern, like a dog he saw once at a dyer’s shop ; he wasted a whole cake of red on his tail, and then he tied him up to a post, and all the other little dogs in the yard came and barked at him. Ponto went nearly mad, and he pulled away so hard at the rope he was tied by, that at last a cracker, which Percy had tied into it, went off, and then he got loose, and the poor dog made off to the nearest pond, and has never been seen or heard of since.”

“ Oh lor, and wasn’t it fun though ! ” remarked the hero of the story, who had been listening in delighted silence to the recital of his own exploits, and now ventured to draw near ; so Edith had the boy and girl both on her hands at once.

The ladies were longer in coming back this time ; they were lingering at the other end of the conservatory, and though Edith

was listening with all her ears, she could not hear what they were saying.

“I say, Miss Vivian,” continued Percy the Pickle, in a confidential tone (he told Mabel afterwards that he liked her face, and didn’t think she looked as if she’d ‘peach’) “did you taste any of that sort of pagoda cake with the green and red fruit outside? My! wasn’t it ‘scrumptious!’ I had a bit of it before ever it got into the dining-room. Blithers had put it down on the slab, in the hall, and when his back was turned, I just whisked out one of the shiny green plums off the bottom row with the garden scissors, and put in a green ‘solitaire’ ball instead. It looked just exactly the same by candle-light, and nobody would know the difference, unless they came to bite it. But I say, Miss Vivian, you must not tell, you know; Ma’d be nice and angry if she only knew.”

If Edith had swallowed the ‘solitaire’ ball whole, she was not likely to have said anything about it just then, for at that moment

Lady Prattle's voice became audible again, and she was just able to distinguish what she was saying.

"You must not believe all the stories you hear, Miss Sharp ; you know, those sort of things often get so much exaggerated," the old lady was observing, in a tone of expostulation.

"Oh, but in this case I am certain there is no exaggeration," replied the other, with a good deal of acidity in her manner. "Much as I could wish to believe the contrary, the facts admit of no doubt. My brother is one of the confidential men at Box and Brownwood's, and he has told me as a certain fact, that Captain Neville transmitted a large sum of money to a lady in India about a month ago ; and that looks very bad, you know."

Lady Prattle's faith in the man she was trying to defend was evidently shaken by this last assertion.

"Well, my dear," she said, in rather a sorrowful tone, "young men will be young

men, I suppose ; but I hope, for dear Miss Vivian's sake, that this may not be true, or, if true, that at any rate it can admit of an explanation."

Edith could scarcely believe her own ears, or contain the indignation with which her heart was boiling over. "Young men will be young men, indeed!" That she should ever live to hear such a thing as that said of her peerless Harry, her *preux chevalier*, her paladin among the knights of modern days. And when, almost directly after, the two ladies, who had, it seemed, finished their walk in the greenhouse, re-entered the room, it was as much as she could do to resist the impulse which prompted her to stand up and face that "wicked woman," and dare her to substantiate the base slanders she had been uttering. But it was of no use to make a scene in Mrs. Tucker's drawing-room. She thought Mrs. Tucker herself would be so terribly distressed, and so she contented herself by fixing her eyes upon the "wicked woman" as she came through

the door, and looking her through and through. Miss Penelope Sharp saw, and it is to be supposed, comprehended, that look, if one might judge by the effect it produced upon her. Blush she could not, she had given up that amiable weakness many a long year before, but she looked about as uncomfortable as it was in her nature to do, and retreating into a distant corner of the room, 'shrank back into her proper nothingness,' as Froude would say, for the rest of the evening. She did not stay very late, nor did Edith ; the latter, poor girl, was completely upset by the cruel words she had been listening to. As long as the lynx-eyed Penelope sat opposite to her, she did her best to keep up appearances ; but no sooner was the incubus of that person's society removed, than she began to feel very miserable indeed. Sir James Prattle and Mr. Tucker came one after the other and implored her to sing, but she refused them both, for in her present frame of mind she felt it was a simple impossibility for her to attempt such a thing.

To talk coherently, even, was very difficult, and she gave up the effort after a time in despair. How delighted she was when at last the departure of one or two other guests enabled her to escape without seeming rude ; and she astonished her poor aunt not a little by breaking into a passionate fit of weeping the very moment she had reached the welcome shelter of her own carriage.

By the next morning's post she wrote off to Harry and told him what she had heard, and then implored him to give her power and leave to contradict the cruel slanders which Miss Sharp had thought fit to make public.

But when Harry's answer came, to her surprise and disappointment, she found that he made no mention whatever of the subject, but ignored that part of her letter altogether. He said, however, that he should be back again at Mrs. Lorrimer's in less than a week's time ; so perhaps he meant to take the matter into his own hands, and silence the voice of calumny in

the shape of Miss Penelope Sharp at once and for ever.

He came to the day and hour he had said, and when he did come he looked so brave and handsome, that Edith could no longer find it in her heart to question the wisdom of what he had done. They met first at the Lorrimers' house, at dinner, and that night Edith said no word to her cousin on the subject which, as was not surprising, occupied a good deal of her thoughts.

The next morning, however, he rode over to Enderleigh at an early hour, and then she spoke her mind to him at once.

They were in the same breakfast-room where Edith had been sitting when Captain Neville asked her for the money, and he had thrown himself now into an easy chair, after his usual somewhat lazy fashion.

"Harry," she said, going up to him, and standing in front of his chair, "why did you not answer my letter of last week properly? What do you intend to do about that wicked report I told you I had heard?"

"Nothing," he answered coolly, though she could see that his brow darkened a little as he spoke.

"Nothing!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to take *no* notice of it whatever?"

"I mean to take no notice of it whatever," he answered in the same tone.

"And you will suffer a false accusation like that which that horrid woman chose to make to remain unchallenged?" she asked a little indignantly. "I don't think you ought to do it. Why should you?"

"I have my own reasons, Edith, for what I am doing. In the first place, the scratches of an old cat like that are not worth making much fuss about; and in the next place, I am not going to deny the accusation, as you call it, which she made, because it is perfectly true."

"True? Harry!" She said no more, but she walked proudly away to the window to hide the bitter look of shame and disappointment which had come over her face. The words had been on her lips, "True

that you sent the money you borrowed from me to a lady in India?" but the thought alone which they involved brought a crimson blush to her cheeks, and she could not say the words aloud. Not even with the man who was to be her future husband could she argue such a point as this.

He got up and followed her at once. "Edith," he said, in a very different tone, and holding out both his hands as he spoke, "when I asked you to lend me that hundred pounds, I told you the worst part of it was, that I could not tell you what it was for; you were good and brave, and said that you would trust me. Now's the time for you to keep your word, dear. Give me your hands, and tell me that you *will* trust me, or else you had better throw me over at once, and let our engagement come to an end. What I have done with that money is my secret, and I cannot explain it to you to-day. Some of these days, perhaps, I will tell you all about it, from beginning to end, but I cannot, and *will* not tell you now."

He spoke so calmly, so exactly like a person who had right on his side. His manner was so different from that of a man who was striving to frame excuses for his own faults or follies, that Edith's pride could not hold out against him.

The alternative of breaking off her engagement, too, was something too dreadful to be thought of, without further proof of his unworthiness. And so, almost in spite of herself, she put her two hands into his, as he had told her to do.

"Harry, I will do my best to trust you, but you are trying me very hard," she said, in a broken voice, and keeping her head averted, to hide the big tears which were rolling down her cheeks.

"That's my dear brave girl," he answered, holding her hands locked fast in both his own, and at the same time stooping over her. He would have claimed a more tender caress, but she turned her lips abruptly and resolutely away.

Captain Neville saw and understood the

movement, and her repulse wounded him to the quick. From that day till the time came when she gave him one of her own free will, he never asked Edith for another kiss.

## CHAPTER X.

AND so the cloud settled down between them again, as it had done before,—a cloud of distrust and suspicion, which only increased in darkness each time that they met and came to no better understanding. Edith made no attempt to conceal that she was but half satisfied, and altogether unhappy, and, in proportion as she grew low-spirited, he became more moody and reserved. But this state of things was not to last much longer now. Just when the day seemed darkest, the crisis came, not in the shape of a thunderstorm, but of a refreshing summer shower; and then the sun shone out again, and God's own rainbow of hope and gladness was to be seen behind those broken

clouds, looking more bright and beautiful than it had ever done before.

One morning, about a week after, Miss Vivian mounted her horse, and rode over to a village beyond Lyndford, to call upon her friends Colonel and Mrs. Lyle, whose acquaintance, as the reader will remember, she had made the year before at Baden-Baden. Harry had asked her to put off paying this visit till some day when he could go with her, as he too knew Colonel Lyle slightly. He was to have come over to Enderleigh and ridden in another direction with her that morning, but an hour after the time appointed he had not arrived, and Edith would wait no longer. She went out without him, and what is more, went to the Lyles.

It was a lovely morning, bright sunshine overhead, and the air balmy and soft, as if it were the merry month of May. The forest trees whispered together pleasantly as they waved to and fro, decked in their new fresh garments of green ; for the season was unusually mild, and already they were

bursting into leaf; the birds were calling and carolling to each other from bough to bough. But it might have been the dullest, dreariest day in November, as far as Edith Vivian's feelings were concerned. Her spirits were at the lowest possible ebb. Perhaps the very perversity which had prompted her to choose this ride in disobedience, or rather in disregard, of her cousin's expressed wishes, might have had something to do in making her feel more miserable than ever as soon as she had fairly started; but she would not go back.

Mrs. Lyle was at home, the servant said, when she reached 'The Cedars,' but she was not in the drawing-room when Edith entered. The servant had announced her name at the door of the room, and then left her standing there, as she thought for the first moment alone.

But directly after a fragile *mignonne* looking lady, quite a girl in face and figure, got up from a sofa, where she had been

lying, and advanced towards her, at first with some degree of timidity ; but then, as if with an impulse she could not resist, she threw her arms round Edith's neck, and kissed her several times.

To say that Edith was surprised is not saying enough ; she was fairly astounded, for she had never seen the little lady in all her life before. She drew back a little, but not unkindly, for fear of hurting the other's feelings.

“ I think you must be mistaking me for somebody else,” she said, smiling.

“ Oh, no, I'm not,” was the answer she received. “ I heard you announced, and I thought of course you had come over to see me. Don't you know who I am ?”

“ Not in the least,” replied Edith ; “ but it doesn't matter, you are a dear girl, whoever you are,” she added reassuringly, and putting her arm round her companion's waist, for she looked so frail and delicate, that Edith could not but fancy she would fall without some such support.

“Oh, but it does matter, and I’m not a girl at all; that *is* good,” exclaimed the little lady, laughing and clapping her hands. “I’ve been married for nearly two whole years, and my name is Lucy Neville; *now* do you know who I am?”

For a moment Edith absolutely could not answer, she was so completely taken by surprise.

“You don’t mean to say that you are my cousin George’s wife?” she gasped out at last.

“But I am, though. Why should I not be?” was the other’s laughing retort.

“Because—because, of course, I thought you were in India.”

“So I was a little while ago, but I am here now, you see,” said young Mrs. Neville, going back to her sofa, and making Edith sit down beside her. “Do you mean to say you did not know I was coming home?”

“No, indeed! Nobody ever told me there was any idea of such a thing.”

“Nobody knew it, I suppose, except Aunt

Janey and Harry ; but of course I thought he would have told *you*. I know all about it, you see," she added archly, and laying her hand once more on Edith's shoulder. "Oh, I am so glad to see you at last," she went on, for Edith was blushing deeply, and did not find it easy to reply. "I have heard so much about you for so long,—first from Minnie Neville, and then from Aunt Janey,—that's Mrs. Lyle you know,—after she met you last year, and last, not least, from Harry himself. I found a long letter from him waiting for me at Cairo, and it was nearly all about you. Oh, Edith, what a noble fellow he is, and how happy you ought to be !"

"But when did you arrive ?" asked Edith at last, still almost breathless from astonishment ; "and how came Harry to know you were coming home, and no one else ?"

"Because it was a little plot between Aunt Janey and him, and my husband and me, and because Harry—but don't you know, Edith—I may call you Edith, may I

not? Do you mean to say he has never told you?"

"Told me what?" asked Edith, feeling more and more bewildered.

"Why, I never should have been here at all if it had not been for him; and very likely I should have been dead before this,—the doctors all said I could not live for three months longer, if I stayed in India."

"And what had Harry to do with your coming to England?" asked Edith, as a faint glimmering of the truth began to dawn upon her mind.

"He sent me the money for my passage home, to be sure!" exclaimed Mrs. George Neville. "Didn't he tell you? what a shame! I declare I will tell you all about it now, to let you know how noble and good he is, in case you didn't happen to know it before. He did certainly promise George that no one should ever hear of it unless we chose to tell them ourselves; but, of course, I never thought but that he would make

you an exception. But what's the matter, Edith?—what makes you look so funny, aren't you well?"

"Oh, yes, quite well; never mind me, it is nothing!" exclaimed poor Edith, choking back the rush of happy tears which threatened to overpower her, as best she could. And the next moment, with an impulse which Lucy Neville never quite understood, she caught the little lady in her arms, and straining her to her heart, kissed her once or twice very tenderly. "Go on, dear little sister," she said softly; "go on."

"Well, dear," Mrs. Neville resumed, after she had returned her caress, "you must know I have never been well since I went out to India, three years ago. Then I married, and I have been little else than an invalid ever since, and the last few months it has been worse than ever," she added, blushing a little and looking away. "I was so ill at Cawnpore in December, that the doctor said, go to England I *must* before the spring, or I should not be alive in three

months. George, poor fellow ! was terribly grieved to part with me," and the poor little wife began to cry a little on her own account here ; " but he could not come with me, you see, so he sent me down to Bombay, to go by the next steamer but one, at the end of January. He had a reason for my waiting, for some friends of his were going by that one, and he thought, perhaps, they would take care of me. But in the meantime some wretched bank in Bombay broke, and away went all poor George's savings, and the £100 he had lodged there for my passage-money as well. So there was I, left in Bombay without money, and almost without friends, except that all English people are kind to one another in India. My poor husband was in an agony about me, for, although I was better directly I left Cawnpore, the cholera was raging badly in Bombay at the time ; however, the money was gone, and he knew not how to replace it. He could not, or would not, apply to his father. We are both dreadfully afraid of Sir Edward, you

know, Edith, for he was awfully angry with my darling George for marrying me, and he has never written him a single line ever since. So, as a last resource, he wrote to Harry, and told him exactly how we were situated, and asked him if he could possibly advance or borrow a hundred pounds to send me for the passage. And in another month's time,—Harry could not have lost a single day after he received the letter,—I had a telegram from him to tell me that he had given orders to Box and Brownwood's to credit me, or something, for £150,—I don't know exactly what, for I don't understand those business things,—and that I was to draw upon some banker at Bombay for that amount ; and what is more, in the letter he wrote me to Cairo, he said George was never to worry himself about paying the money back, for he was going to be made a rich man for ever more, and so he hoped I would accept the £150 as a wedding present, seeing he had not been able to give me one when I was married.

Of course, George will never listen to this for a moment; but was it not kind?"

"George *will* listen to it, and for more than a moment, as far as I am concerned, or I am very much mistaken," was Edith's mental ejaculation.

"Well," continued Lucy Neville, "my good friend Mr. Barclay managed all the business part for me beautifully; and, thanks to Harry's promptness, I was able to start by the mail which left Bombay about three days later, the second mail in February; and so here I am at home again, in Aunt Janey's dear old house."

"And when did you arrive?" asked Edith; "does Harry know you are come?"

"I don't suppose he does, for I only arrived last night. We had such a lovely passage from Alexandria, in spite of the time of year, that the 'Pera' reached Southampton quite a day and a half before she was expected. I was going to write to Harry this afternoon, for I was too tired last night, but now you will be able to tell him all about

it. Was it not an odd chance that you should have come here to-day?"

"It was rather odd, but it was a very happy chance, if a chance at all," replied Edith earnestly. "I am so glad I came over, Lucy, for it has done me more good than I can well tell you."

"Has it? how kind of you to say so, and to call me Lucy," said the other, with a radiant smile; "then you are glad to see me, really?"

"I should think so, too; who would not be glad to see such a dear little ready-made sister-in-law, particularly when it was such an unexpected treat?"

"Edith," said poor Lucy Neville, in a low tone, and nestling her head down on to her cousin's shoulder, "you are the very first of George's family I have seen since I was married to him, and I am so awfully afraid of them all. I am sure I shall love you. Tell me that you will try to love me a little bit, dear, if only for Harry's sake."

"Not for Harry's sake, but for your

own," was Edith's generous reply. "I could not have helped loving you, you dear little thing, if there had been no such person as Harry in the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nothing would induce Miss Vivian to remain to lunch at the 'Cedars,' though Mrs. Lyle pressed her cordially to do so. Lucy Neville added her entreaties to her aunt's. She would come over to lunch, or to dinner or anything they liked the next day, and make Harry come with her; but to-day she must go home, she had something important to attend to, which could not be deferred!" she said. And at last, when they found she was so resolute, they were fain to let her go.

Oh, how glorious was the sunshine now! How the birds sang, and the trees waved and whispered in joyful unison! And this time Edith's heart could join in perfect harmony with that thanksgiving chorus. Her ride home was almost a race. She put Imogen into a fast canter the moment she was clear

of the gates at the Cedars, and scarcely drew rein again till she reached the entrance hall at Enderleigh ; then, springing from the saddle without waiting for any help, she ran up the steps.

“ Captain Neville is in the library, Ma’am,” said the old butler, a little reproachfully she thought, as he met her in the hall ; “ he has been here since twelve o’clock, and I don’t think he’s very well.”

She never waited to answer the old man, but walked straight on to the library to the easy chair, where she knew she should find her cousin Harry. There he was, as she expected, looking a good deal paler than usual, and just a little cross. He never even looked round, or laid aside the paper he was reading as she entered the room, though he knew whose footstep it was well enough. So she came softly from behind him, and kneeling down beside his chair, laid her hand upon his shoulder and just touched his cheek with her lips.

"Harry, I wonder if you can ever forgive me?" she said in a broken voice?

"My darling Edith!" were his first astonished words, as, starting up from his lazy attitude, he flung the paper away into the middle of the room. "I should think it would be within the bounds of possibility, when I know what I have to forgive."

"Oh, I have been so very, very naughty," said Edith, in a sort of sobbing voice, though there were no tears in her eyes. "I have been thinking such hard things of you for these days and weeks past, and now that I know the truth, and have heard of all your goodness, it almost breaks my heart to think that I could have done it."

"Tell me what all this is about, Edith," he said, soothingly, for she was in a fair way to become hysterical.

"I have been to the Lyles' this morning," she answered, as if that must explain everything.

"Oh, you have, have you?" he answered, putting his arm round her waist.

“I thought I asked you not to go there till I could go with you. Is that the naughtiness?”

“That’s one thing. I believe I went there just because you told me not, and because you kept me waiting so this morning.”

“Well, upon a proper show of penitence, perhaps I might be induced to forgive that piece of disobedience,” said Harry loftily.

“Oh, but I’m not a bit sorry for that,” she retorted with all her old saucy manner. “If it were a question of doing it again, I’d do it again to-morrow;” and she gave her head a little toss as she spoke, by way of emphasis.

“Upon my word, Miss Rebellious, this is nice conduct on your part,” exclaimed her cousin, tightening his hold upon her waist. “This sort of thing must be put a stop to. I shall have to keep you in better order by-and-by, young lady; when you are Mrs. Henry Neville, as you said the other day. Well! was Mrs. Lyle at home?”

“Yes, and somebody else was at home, too. Mrs. George Neville has arrived in England, sir.”

“The dickens she has !” exclaimed Harry, who was fairly taken by surprise this time. “And when did she arrive, I should like to know ? She wasn’t due for two more days.”

“Only last night. She was in the drawing-room when I went in, and we had a long talk together ; and Harry, she has told me everything—all about the money, and how noble and good you have been to her ; and, oh, you naughty, naughty boy, why didn’t you tell me what you wanted that £100 for before ?”

Captain Neville burst out laughing. “Little simpleton !” he ejaculated, “why couldn’t she keep her tongue quiet, and not go blabbing about other people’s affairs. “I did not tell you before, Edith,” he added in a graver tone, “first, because I knew very well what the result would have been if I had, and I wasn’t going to have any of my family preying upon you, even before we

were married. And, secondly, because George asked me to let the matter be between ourselves; and I promised him that no living soul should hear of it from my lips. That's why I didn't tell you any sooner."

"And to think that I ever doubted you, my darling," said Edith in her most caressing tones, and bending down her head till her cheek rested on his hand. "You shall send my money to fifty ladies in India, Harry, if you like, and I will never doubt you again."

"Very well, I will let you know when I want the next instalment," he said, laughing. But the laugh was a little forced, and looking up, she saw that he was still very pale, and that there was a suspicious-looking mist about his eyes.

"Is there anything the matter, Harry?" she asked eagerly. "Mason said you were not well, and I'm sure you are not. You have not been thrown from your horse, have you?"

"No, not exactly," he answered, "don't

alarm yourself, dear, because there isn't *de quoi*. That brute of a cob, that old Lorrimer puts me on, to come over here, tossed up his head unexpectedly, just as I was starting, and gave me a violent blow on the forehead which almost stunned me for a moment. That's all; only I had to go back and have it doctored with vinegar and water, or I should not have been a very presentable object by this time, I suspect. That's what made me so late this morning. It's made my head ache a little ever since, but even that is better now, since I have seen you."

Edith looked at him with eyes full of sympathy. "You are sure there was nothing worse than that?" she asked.

"Quite sure," he answered, returning the look with interest. "And so, Edith," he added presently in a lower tone, and imprisoning the little truant hand which was playing fast and loose with the buttons of his coat, "so, you thought the occasion worthy of the first voluntary kiss you ever gave me in your life?"

The person thus addressed hung her head and blushed.

“ Did you know it was the first ? ”

“ Perhaps I did.”

“ *Edith*, give me one more, just a little one.”

“ It would not be a voluntary one now you have asked for it.”

“ Never mind, an involuntary one, then, I’m not particular.”

She looked up, and saw that he was still very pale, and that there was the same strange mist to be seen in his eyes ; so she just simply did as he asked her. This time it was their lips that met.

“ Now, Harry, you must really promise me something,” she exclaimed, starting up from her kneeling attitude the moment after.

“ What is it, mistress mine ? ”

“ Oh, you nasty cold cautious man, you might promise for once without asking, seeing I have just been so generous to you ? It’s nothing so very hard.”

“ Well then, for once I promise without asking. What is it ? ”

“ Only this—that you will never attempt to pay me back one farthing of the money I gave you last month. We shall end by quarrelling if you do, and I shall just throw it into the fire—that’s all.”

Harry broke into a merry laugh which had a ‘*soupçon*’ of triumph about its tone. “ Too late, my lady,” he exclaimed, “ I could not keep my promise if I would. My ship came home yesterday morning in the shape of the payment of an old-standing debt, and I paid the £150 into your banker’s hands at Salisbury, just before they closed in the afternoon. So now, my dear, we are quits.”

And so he had foiled her to the very last, and had had his own way after all.

Poor Edith was almost ready to cry with vexation, and yet she loved the man better than ever, for the very fact that he had mastered her. .

“ It’s too bad ! ” she cried, stamping her

foot indignantly ; “ and all I can say is this, that if within three days you have not chosen for yourself a new horse, as I told you before, I only hope that wretched old cob of Mr. Lorrimer’s will give you another knock on the nose before the week’s out, and a harder one too next time.”

And then, with her long riding habit trailing behind her, she walked majestically across the room.

“ I say, I *say* ! what a little vixen you are !” he cried, following her with his eyes. “ Stop, Edith !” he called out when she had reached the door, and Edith stopped.

“ Come back a minute, I’ve got something to say to you.”

“ You must say it as we are then, I am not coming back.”

“ Very well ; you remember the arrangement we made as to what was to happen after Easter, if that money was paid back ?”

“ I do not remember making any arrangement about your paying the money back,” she retorted, holding him at bay to the very

last, and fighting hard for every inch of ground, though she knew it was only in a losing cause. "I remember saying that I would not have it back at all."

"Bother the money ! we have had enough of that. Do you remember, I ask, *what* was to happen after Easter, if that money was paid back ?"

"There *was* something, I think," she said, faintly, and playing with her riding whip ; not the inlaid one, however, which Sir Ralph Armytage had given her.

"Well, the money is paid back now," he continued.

"Well !" she said, looking down and becoming suddenly very much interested in the pattern of the carpet at her feet.

"Well !" he repeated in the same tone ; then he began to laugh a little, and Edith began to get very red.

"Fortunately for me," he went on, "Easter falls very early this year, on the 28th of March." And then he got up from his chair and came a step or two nearer to-

wards her. "Edith, tell me, dear, shall we be married on the first or second of April?"

By way of answer Edith began a sort of mental calculation on her fingers, beginning with her thumb, "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday," she said. When she came to the little finger she stopped suddenly. "Oh, I would not be married on a Friday for the world," she exclaimed, pretending to look very frightened, "it's so dreadfully unlucky." "It must be on the first of April then, I suppose, if you are so very anxious to make a fool of yourself."

And she had escaped out of the room, and was half-way up the stairs before he could think of any appropriate revenge for that last flying shot.

And this was the first and only piece of superstition that Edith Vivian was ever known to be guilty of in all her life.

## EPILOGUE.

TEN years have passed away. The Edith Vivian we knew in the past has been during those ten long years the happy wife of Harry Neville, and she is now the proud mother of four beautiful children. So must we leave her, for my tale is drawing to a close, and of my heroine herself, I have little more to say. I must confess that I feel sorry to part company with my noble Edith. She has grown to be a favourite of mine in the course of these pages; but the history of the 'Heiress of Enderleigh' ends with the last days of her unmarried life, and from that time forth, Mrs. Neville, of Enderleigh, reigns in her stead.

But before I take my last leave of the

reader, who in his kindness has accompanied me thus far, I must ask him to come with me to Enderleigh, and to witness two or three scenes which took place there about the time of which I speak, and which will explain to him something of the changes which those ten years had wrought in the fortunes and circumstances of some of the other persons, whom he has met with in the course of this non-sensational story.

The first scene is rather a sad one,—we will not linger upon it overlong. It took place one summer's morning in Mrs. Neville's dressing-room, or rather in a room which was so called, but which was in reality quite as much of a boudoir as a dressing-room, and was a favourite resort during the morning hours with those visitors at Enderleigh, who were at all intimate in the house.

Edith herself was sitting there now, in company with a lady, who was lying on a couch drawn near to an open window. In another window a little quiet-looking girl of

about ten years old was sitting working. She looked even older than her age, and was not in the least like Edith, though her name was Neville. But, on the other hand, no one could have doubted the relationship between Edith and her eldest son, a fine little fellow of about five years old, who was sitting on a stool at her feet, playing very happily with a box of soldiers, though the boy was something like his father too.

But it was with the lady lying on the sofa, rather than with the heir of the Nevilles, that we have to do at present.

We have seen her once before, and should have not much difficulty in recognizing her as the "little lady," who had so taken Edith by surprise on that day when she rode over to the Cedars to see Mrs. Lyle.

The light girlish figure is very little changed, and the pretty *mignonne* face scarcely looks a day older, only that there is a sadly wearied look at times upon those delicate features which was not there then. The curls she used to have, too, are gone, and

her hair is braided smoothly back instead, and partly hidden under a soft tulle cap. She *will* wear that little cap which makes her look such a young matron, for she is not quite thirty even yet. She has on a plain black silk dress, neatly, but simply made. She never wears anything else but black now ; for it is better to tell the truth at once : poor little Lucy Neville is a widow, and George Neville never lived to see his only child, that quiet girl, who is sitting at work over there at the window ; “ Mousey,” as they all call her.

They never told her exactly how he had died. They never told her that he had been shot down like a dog, from the shore, while he was sitting in one of those two boats of which we have all heard, which made their way safe *out* of Cawnpore, on one of those hot days in the summer solstice of 1857, when those horrible events were enacted which Englishmen cannot even yet speak of, without grinding their teeth with rage and agony ; shot through the heart, as he threw himself

forward in the vain hope of shielding a young lad, whose mother had died a few days before in the doomed city and with her dying breath had implored Major Neville to do "what he could for her boy." And he kept his promise. He did what he *could*, poor fellow, though it was all of no use. Harry would have done just the same if he had been there, for in some respects there was a strong family likeness between the brothers.

But they managed to keep the sad story a secret from his wife. She was very ill at the time, and happily never asked to see the papers.

They told her that he had fallen while trying to save the life of another man ; but to her dying day, Lucy Neville never knew but that her husband had died a soldier's death on the field of battle. The poor little loving heart was saved that pang at least.

Many people in India had been apt to speak of Mrs. George Neville as a poor creature, "a frivolous, flighty little thing ;"

and when they heard of her loss they prophesied that she would soon forget "poor old George," and get married again directly.

But they were all wrong. Lucy Neville had never forgotten her husband, and had never married again, though she had been a widow now for nearly eight years. Not that her grief caused her to become in the least morbid or morose. She could be as merry as a bird at times, if she were only well in health ; far more light of heart than her little daughter who sat yonder working ever promised to be. But she had been delicate all her life ; and those two hot seasons spent in the plains of India, followed so soon after by the shock of her husband's death, seemed to have completely undermined her strength, and she was little better than a constant invalid now. A very gentle and patient one, however ; and Edith loved her very dearly. She was supposed to live at the Cedars with her aunt, Mrs. Lyle, but she spent a great deal of time at Enderleigh, and Harry and his wife were only too glad to have her there whenever she would come.

“This is one of your very bad days, Lucy dear,” said Edith bending over her sister-in-law, and pushing back the fair hair from her temples with a light caressing touch; “your head is aching dreadfully, I am sure, from the very look of your eyes. Harry says you are to lie quite still where you are, and nurse yourself till after lunch, and then he will come and fetch you down himself, and carry you into the garden if you don’t feel strong enough to walk; that was the message he told me to give you.”

“He is very kind,” answered Lucy in a weak voice, “and so are you, but I am afraid I am a sad burden to you all.” The poor little lady was in very low spirits that morning.

“Not a bit of a burden,” replied Edith, laughing; “why you would be just nothing to carry,” she added, purposely misunderstanding the other’s meaning.

Then she got up from her seat and went over to the window, where her niece was sitting.

“And how is my quiet mousey getting on with her work?” she asked.

“Very nicely, thank you, auntie,” replied the little girl, showing her the slipper she was at work upon.

But Edith’s son and heir took advantage of his mother’s absence, to upset a whole box of soldiers with a great crash, thereby causing a considerable noise, and her attention was thus called back to this, her special charge.

“Gently, gently, Georgey, my man,” she said; “poor Aunt Lucy’s head is very bad, and you will make it worse if you make such a noise; you must promise to be very quiet if I let you stop here.” The little man tried, I believe, to obey her, and for a short time succeeded pretty well, but presently another small accident happened to him. He lost his balance, while stooping over to reach after a deserter who had strayed some distance from the ranks, and toppled headlong from the stool on which he was sitting, into the

middle of the whole army of soldiers, whereupon ensued a worse crash than before.

He did not cry, and Edith did not scold him, because she positively did not think he could help it ; but this time she folded up her own work, and took one or two other decided steps, preparatory to taking him away. "Come, Georgey, it's lesson time," she said.

"Oh, let him stay, poor little fellow," pleaded his aunt from the sofa ; "he could not help that tumble, I'm sure, and he does not disturb me in the least. I like to see him play."

"But, my dear Lucy, it really is lesson time, and I cannot have my son's education neglected. He shall come back again by-and-by, perhaps, if he is good and does his spelling like a man. So come along, Sir George."

The last words were spoken by Edith as the merest joke ; she attached no definite meaning to them in particular ; but they came home with a very sad meaning, indeed,

to her poor little sister-in-law. Looking down the moment after, Edith discovered to her distress and dismay, that Lucy Neville had hidden her face in the sofa cushions, and was sobbing bitterly.

“Lucy, my darling girl! what have I done?” she exclaimed, grieved to the very heart to see the effect her words had produced! “how could I be so thoughtless? I was not thinking in the least what I was saying. Indeed I did not mean to be so cruel to you, dear.”

“Oh, no, no! I know you didn’t,” said Lucy, putting her arms round Edith’s neck, and drawing her down beside her. “It’s not that, dear, only the words sounded so familiar to me, and I am weak and nervous to-day. I used to call him so sometimes in India, just for fun, and he used to pretend to scold me, though he was never really angry; and now when you said the name it all came back to me again. And it is his birthday to-day, though I dare say you did not know it.”

Edith only pressed her closer in her arms, and gave her a silent kiss of sympathy.

“Don’t think, dear,” Lucy went on, that I grudge your darling boy his inheritance, or that I envy you any one of your many blessings. I love you far too much to envy you, dear. It is not that, God knows. I would not have it otherwise if I could; and I am very glad now that mine was a girl, though I was a little sorry perhaps at first. But oh, Edith, Edith, you should have all that is yours now and welcome, if I could only have my dear, dear husband back again!”

And so, Sir Edward Neville had his wish. The desire of his whole lifetime was realized at last, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that at some future day the baronet’s title and the estates of Enderleigh would be held again by one and the same person. But when he came to look back, as he must have done sometimes, and remembered at what a cost that wish had been fulfilled, when he thought in his old age of his brave eldest son lying dead beneath the

mocking waters of that cruel Indian river, I fancy that he might be inclined to think, that the gratification which he had so earnestly coveted had been purchased too dearly after all !

\* \* \* \* \*

And what had our old friend, Kate Wentworth, been doing with herself all this time ? some of my readers may perhaps be disposed to ask. If they will come with me to Edith's real dressing-room, at Enderleigh, one afternoon, a month or two later, they will be able to see and learn for themselves.

It was a dull, dreary-looking day, about the middle of September, very cold for the time of the year. Edith, however, was getting ready to take a ride with Harry, in spite of its not being a very inviting afternoon. He could not go out with her very often now, for he was a magistrate, and a churchwarden, and everything else that country gentlemen generally are. Moreover, he was on the high road to becoming a member of

parliament some future day, and his time was a good deal taken up with attending committees and various other kinds of meetings; so a ride with her husband was far too great a treat to be given up simply because the sky was a little overcast. She had dismissed her maid, and had asked Kate to come into her room with her, instead, and to give her the little help she needed while dressing. "She wanted to say something to her," she said.

Kate? Could that be Kate Wentworth, who was leaning over Mrs. Neville, and tying the lace veil round her riding-hat? Could this sober, staid little woman, dressed in that dark simple dress of grey linsey, without the least little bit of colour by way of relief, be the same bright-eyed, lighthearted girl, whom we saw fluttering about in her blue muslin dress in the Allée of Popplesdorf, the night she walked with Edith and her father to the Kreutzberg?

Yes, it was the same Kate; but she was a good deal changed; the features were the

same ; the honest truthful eyes, the soft feminine mouth, but the expression was very different. There was the womanly look of hard-earned experience, and self dependence on her face now, and all the girlish light-heartedness, which had been there of old, was gone. I remember saying, at the beginning of this book, of Kate Wentworth, that if no great trouble or disappointment came to her in early life, to rob her cheek of its bloom, and to deepen the lines of thought around her mouth, she might continue to look youthful to the end of her days ; but the sorrow and disappointment *had* come, and our little Kate was far more changed in those ten years than either Edith herself, or even the widowed Lucy Neville.

She was an orphan now, poor girl. Her father and mother were both dead ; both lay sleeping under a simple stone in that old churchyard at Lyndford, halfway up the hill.

Mrs. Wentworth had died only a few

weeks after Edith's marriage ; her husband about two years ago. Kate still wore slight mourning for her father. She was very poor, too, for the office in which Mr. Wentworth had insured his life, for her benefit, failed a few months before his death, and one sad morning Kate found herself bereaved of both her parents, and left to begin life on her own account, with scarcely a penny in the world. But it was neither the bereavement nor the poverty which had left such deep traces on her appearance and her manner, and had made her look even older than she really was. She had had another trial to encounter, another heart sorrow to battle with ; but this was a trial of which the world knew nothing, a sorrow which was known only to herself and God. She had fought bravely, and had conquered in the end ; but she had come out of the battle faint and bleeding, with trembling limbs and with a breaking heart.

The hard work, which lay before her in life, was perhaps the best remedy she could

have had for the heart sickness which had come over her. Edith would have had her come and take up her abode entirely at Enderleigh ; but Kate would not hear of it, she would be dependent on no one but herself. I believe that between the two ladies there was some sort of compact, that when Mrs. Neville's children were old enough to require a governess, Kate should come and teach them ; but in the meantime she went to live at Mrs. Mordaunt's, where Edith and she had been for two years together as schoolfellows, and became one of the English teachers in the school where she had been so great a favourite as a girl. She was now staying at Enderleigh for a week or two, on a visit, for she had been suffering from a severe attack of neuralgia, and Mrs. Mordaunt had sent her away to recruit her health and spirits by a little change of occupation and society.

Mrs. Neville was very soon equipped, and ready for her ride. She looked wonderfully

handsome, though a trifle stouter, perhaps, than of old. To-day, however, there was a cloud upon her brow. She seemed very much out of spirits, and just a little cross.

“Sit down, Kate,” she said, “the horses are not round yet, and I want particularly to speak to you before I go out. I am so miserable about poor Ernest.”

“Why miserable?” asked Kate quietly, “he is not worse to-day, is he?”

“Oh no, better decidedly ; he has been getting better every day for the last month. But still it is such slow work ; he has been just fit for nothing ever since he had the rheumatic fever, and he is in that state that the doctors say any day he may have a relapse and be as bad again as ever. Poor fellow, I hope not. Oh, what a dreadful time it was ! The only chance of his getting quite well is for him to go to a warmer climate before the winter sets in, and yet he is so hopelessly obstinate. You heard what happened this morning, did you not ?”

“No, tell me.”

“He had a letter from the foreign office, offering him a first-rate diplomatic appointment of some kind at Palermo for a limited number of years. It would be the very making of him in every way ; the very thing of all others we could have wished for him, and yet he persists in refusing it.”

“Why does he do this ?” asked Kate. Her face was turned away from her companion as she spoke ; she was standing at the window, watching the horses, which were just then being led up to the door.

“Oh, because he has made up his mind that he shall die, and he thinks his days are numbered. He says that no one cares for him, and there is nothing left for him to live for, and that the sooner it is over the better. It is very cruel of him to say so,” continued poor Edith, in a broken voice, as the tears began to roll slowly down her cheeks, “for next to Harry he is my nearest and dearest, and I have loved

him so very dearly ever since I can remember. But I suppose I must put all that sort of thing down as the effect of his illness. If he would only marry now ! A good wife would indeed be to him a blessing from the Lord. I told him so this morning, and what do you think he said ? ‘ Who would marry such a worn-out, broken-down man as I am, I should like to know ? No ! the only woman I ever loved would not have me when I asked her, and I never mean to ask another as long as I live.’ Those were his very words. I can’t conceive what he meant, for I never heard of this before, but I only know it has made me very miserable. But there, it is of no use crying about it, and Harry will only be vexed if my eyes are red,” she said wiping away her tears.

At that moment, the said Harry’s voice was heard calling to her from the drive below, in a tone of some little impatience, to know if she were nearly ready.

“ Coming, coming ! ” she exclaimed, going

up to the window, and nodding to him by way of answer ; still, she did not offer to leave the room.

“ No woman need be afraid to marry Ernest now,” she went on, “ though in old times it might have been different ; but he is so changed within the last year or two. He has been regular and attentive at church, and before he never went at all. And Ernest is no hypocrite ; he would never do anything for the sake of appearances, or to please any one else. One night, when he was very ill, too, he promised me, of his own free will, that if he lived he would never touch a card again ; and all the time that he had the rheumatic fever I never heard him swear once, though I have seen him biting his lips to keep back the bad words. And he suffered awfully, too, poor fellow ! his shrieks nearly drove me out of the house, at times. I don’t know why I am telling you all this,” she went on, “ except that— ”

“ Except that what ? ” said Kate, as

Edith hesitated ; “ tell me quickly what you mean, Edith, for you must not keep your husband waiting.”

She spoke in a strained, unnatural tone, very unlike her usual voice, but Edith was too much occupied with her own thoughts to take any notice of it. “ Well, I thought, perhaps, you might be able to do something to help me. If you would only go and talk to him, while I am out, about this appointment. You used to be such good friends in old times, that perhaps he would mind what you say now. If you could only persuade him not to write to the Foreign Office to-day, it would be something. He told me he was determined to answer the letter, and refuse the appointment at once ; but if he would but wait for a day or two, something might turn up which would induce him to change his mind.”

Once more Harry’s voice was heard from below, speaking in a tone of angry expostulation.

“ Edith, Edith, are you ever coming ?”

"There, I must go," exclaimed his wife. "Good-bye, Katie," she added, giving her a kiss, "think over what I have said, dear, and see if you cannot do something to help me."

"If I can do anything to help you I will," was Kate's answer, made in the same hard tone.

After Edith had left her she stood quite still for a few minutes by the window. She waited, and saw Edith run lightly down the steps at the entrance-hall, holding her habit gracefully looped over her arm, and noticed that she stopped to bestow a parting caress on her 'dear old dog,' Prince Rupert, who sat lazily winking at his mistress as she passed. He was very old and feeble now, very deaf, and almost blind; but he held his own old place in his mistress's heart, and was still prime favourite among all the dogs at Enderleigh. After that she saw Captain Neville come forward, give his wife a sort of good-humoured scolding for keeping him waiting, and then

lift her lightly into the saddle. He never allowed any one else to perform this service for her when he was anywhere within reach. They were quite as much or more like lovers in some respects now, than they had been before they were married. Kate *looked* at all these things at least with her bodily eyes, but whether she *saw* them or not is quite another thing ; for there is a great deal of difference between *looking* and *seeing*, as the author of ‘*Horæ Subsecivæ*’ very justly observes. Her mind and thoughts were occupied with very different matters at that moment, for she was in reality doing just exactly as Edith had bidden her, “ thinking over what she had said.”

Had Mrs. Henry Neville been playing a very deep game, I wonder ? or had she spoken in simple innocence, when she had confided to Kate all those things which she had told her about her brother ? Did she or did she not know that there had been a time, some four or five years ago, when this very man of whom they had been speaking,

Ernest Vivian, had come to Kate Wentworth, and asked her to be his wife? And that Kate, loving him in her heart of hearts more dearly than any other being in the world, had yet refused to marry him, because she knew well that as a Christian woman she *dared* not take him for her husband, or trust her life's happiness and her soul's welfare to his keeping? refused him, too, so coldly and decidedly, that he went away with no sort of hope for the future, and without ever dreaming of the love she felt towards him. Probably Edith did not know it, for this was the one sorrow Kate had never told to any human ear; only when Ernest Vivian had left her, she went straight up to her own room, and, throwing herself on her knees, gave way to a passionate outburst of grief. She could not even pray at first,—at least, in words; but from her white quivering lips there came the broken despairing cry, “Oh, mother, mother, why did you die and leave your child alone in this weary world?”

The agony of that moment was fresh in the poor girl's memory still, as she stood there by the open window of Edith's dressing-room; but there was another thought in her mind besides this one now.

Edith had spoken of the great change for the better which had taken place in her brother's tone of mind and feelings, but there had been no need to tell her this. Kate had seen it for herself long before. During the week she had now spent in his company at Enderleigh, she had noticed with her true womanly instinct many things about him, slight in themselves, perhaps, but which, as the index of the higher principle which was at work within, were by no means unimportant in her eyes. And with the 'dawning of the better hope,' the thought had more than once crossed her mind, "*If* he were to ask me again to marry him, should I have the same reason for refusing him that I had before?" He would never ask another woman to be his wife, he had told Edith. Did this mean that

he would never ask the one he loved a second time ?

Slowly, almost like one in a dream, Kate Wentworth moved away from the window. She had no longer any time to waste in mere thought, something lay before her to be done. She had promised Edith that she would help her if she could, and that promise had to be fulfilled. She did not wait to weigh the results or probable consequences of what she was about to do. She was going to use the influence she had with Ernest Vivian, to induce him to pause at least before he wrote to refuse the appointment at Palermo which had been offered to him ; and something told her that she would succeed.

This was what she did.

She went first into the nursery, where she was nearly as much at home as Mrs. Neville herself, and taking possession of Edith's last new baby, her own little namesake and godchild, a sweet little girl of about a year old, she carried her away in

her arms and walked downstairs, without stopping or hesitating, straight into the drawing-room, where she knew she should find Ernest Vivian at that hour of the day.

When she went into the room she had not the remotest idea of what she meant to say. She had simply asked to be guided to do what was right and best, and she left the rest to what *men* call chance.

The invalid was lying, just as she expected to see him, at full length on the sofa, where Harry had left him comfortably settled before he went out ; for he was so weak, poor fellow ! that he could scarcely move across the room without help. And oh, how much he was changed from what he was when we last saw him ! A handsome man still, but a perfect wreck—as he himself had said—of what he once was. He was only just over forty, but he looked at least ten years older. Much of this change was no doubt to be attributed to his long and trying illness, and might disappear in the future ; but there were other marks

traced by the hand of Time which would not be so easily effaced. The lines round his handsome but somewhat effeminate mouth had become deeply and strongly marked, and his hair had grown very thin, and was here and there streaked with grey.

Kate Wentworth saw all these things, as she entered the room, more clearly than she had ever seen them before ; and if she had needed any further incentive to induce her to fulfil the promise she had made to Edith, that one glance would have supplied it. She saw, too, that if her mission was to be of any use, she had no time to lose.

Ernest Vivian had drawn a small writing-table to his sofa, and, supporting himself in a very awkward way upon one arm, was doing his best to indite a letter as he lay. Kate walked straight up to the writing-table, baby and all, and made her first desperate plunge, without knowing whether she should swim or sink.

“Mr. Vivian,” she said, leaning her hand upon the back of his sofa, “cannot I help

you at all? It must hurt you dreadfully to write in that cramped position; won't you let me write that letter for you?"

Ernest laid down his pen, and fell back on the sofa, looking very bewildered. He was completely taken by surprise, and could scarcely believe his own eyes or ears. This was the first time, it seemed to him, that Kate had spoken to him of her own free will since she had been at Enderleigh; certainly the first time she had come into any room where he was, knowing him to be alone.

"Thank you very much," he answered, in a certain weary tone, which had become habitual to him since his illness, "but you can't help me in this; this is a business letter which I have to send to the Foreign Office by to-day's post."

Kate gave a little gasp for breath, and then went on. "Edith asked me to beg you not to write that letter to-day, at any rate not until you had seen her again," she said.

He lay quite still, with his eyes fixed upon her, and seemed even more bewildered than before.

“ You know what is in that letter, then ? ”

“ Yes, I know what is in it. ”

“ And you would urge me not to send it ? ”

“ I would urge you to do nothing hastily, but to wait and consider well before you refuse an appointment which would suit you in so many respects. ”

Ernest raised himself into a sitting posture, and looked her full in the face.

“ And Edith has asked you to tell me this, Miss Wentworth ? ” he said. “ It is odd that she should have chosen you for her messenger. *You*, of all people, ” he added, bitterly. “ I wonder what she did it for ? ”

Poor Kate's cheeks turned crimson, and her heart began to throb so violently as to give her positive pain ; but she had gone on too far now to go back.

“ Because, ” she answered, in a faltering

voice, "because she thought possibly that such an old friend as I am, might have some little influence over you for your own good, or perhaps in order that you might not be able to say to her again, as you did this morning, that you had nothing left to live for, and that no one cared what became of you."

They were not quite the words he had used, but they were as near, perhaps, as she could be expected to quote them.

"*Does any one care?*" he asked, eagerly. "It would make life better worth having, if I thought that one or two persons I know cared whether I lived or died. Such an '*old friend*' as you, for instance, Miss Wentworth. Do you care?"

"We all do," she answered, evasively. And then, with a look of disappointment, he lay back, and said no more.

The moment after, however, he pushed the writing-table away from the sofa with the little strength he had, and pointing to a chair which stood near, asked her to sit down.

She would have done so, no doubt ; but just at that instant Edith's much-neglected baby gave a sort of little weary sigh, by way, perhaps, of reminding Kate, who was still carrying her, of her existence.

Kate held the child towards her uncle. " See, here is Katey come to see you," she said, not sorry for an excuse to change the subject.

The little Katey was a great pet and plaything of Ernest's, who was fond of all children, and she would sit sometimes for hours together, playing on his sofa. But just then her little ladyship, either offended at the previous neglect she had met with, or else frightened at something she saw in her uncle's white face, refused to go to him. She turned her head abruptly away, and began to cry.

Ernest did not care particularly whether she came to him or not, but the child-loving heart within him was touched at the sight of her tears.

" Don't cry, dear," he said, tenderly, and holding out his arms to take her.

This only made matters worse, as it happened. The little girl, more frightened than ever, hid her face on Kate's shoulder, and sobbed aloud.

Her uncle was evidently hurt and annoyed. "There! it is the same with every one, even with the child," he murmured, in a tone of bitter despondency.

It was almost more than Kate could bear. "Oh, baby, baby, how *can* you be so naughty?" she exclaimed, in a trembling voice. "Poor Uncle Ernest!"

She walked up and down the room for a few moments, till she succeeded in subduing the baby's agitation as well as her own. Then she went back to Ernest Vivian's sofa, and once more held the little girl, whose face was all smiles now, towards him.

"Katey says she is good now, Uncle Ernest," she said, making a desperate effort to speak calmly. "She is very sorry she was so naughty before, but she will be quite good, she will indeed, if you will only ask her to come to you again."

Considering that the child in her arms was as yet incapable of articulating any single word, Kate Wentworth's agitated listener might be pardoned, I think, if he found it a little difficult to understand to which Kate she was referring. He raised himself painfully on one arm, and endeavoured to take her hand. "Miss Wentworth, what is all this about, what does it mean?" he added, in an imploring tone. "You are not playing with me, surely, you could not be so cruel?"

Kate did not answer, she was utterly incapable of speaking, and the baby made a sort of screen between her and Ernest, so that he could not see her face.

"Don't go away," he entreated, catching hold of the skirt of her dress, for she seemed about to move away from his sofa again. "I can't follow you if you do. Kate, in very mercy tell me what you mean; don't keep me in suspense. Do you mean that if I go to Palermo, you will go with me as my wife?"

Again there was no answer, but this time a little trembling hand was held out towards him.

He took it, and held it fast. "You cannot mean that you will take me now, worn-out, broken-down creature that I am, and you would not have me before, when I was well and strong?"

Then Kate found her voice at last. "I will take you as you are, Ernest, if you will let me," she said; "and, please God, I will nurse you and take care of you till you are well and strong again."

He fell back on the sofa, utterly exhausted and overcome. "Don't! don't!" he said, gasping for breath; "it's too much, I can't bear it! Don't speak to me again, just yet!" And covering his face with his hands, he burst into tears. Reader, forgive him! he was very, very weak.

I never knew exactly what became of the baby, but the next moment Kate was on her knees beside him, both her arms were round his neck, and his head was pillowed on her shoulder.

“Oh, my darling, my darling! forgive me!” she murmured, in the most caressing tones. “I did not know till now how cruel I had been, but it was not because I did not love you when you asked me before.”

She held him in her arms, half-frightened at the violence of his emotion, and soothed him like a child, till at last he grew calm again. Then he lifted his head from her shoulder, and fixed his eyes upon her face, those eyes which had grown so unnaturally large and bright in the course of his long illness.

“Kiss me, Kate,” he said, in a whisper, “you *may* kiss me; no woman’s lips, except Edith’s, have ever touched mine since my mother died.”

\* \* \* \* \*

One morning, about a week later, Captain and Mrs. Henry Neville were taking a *tête-à-tête* breakfast together in the library at Enderleigh at a somewhat earlier hour than usual. Harry had some magistrate’s business to transact in Salisbury, and was

going to start by an early train, and his wife never allowed him to breakfast alone upon these occasions; but no other members of the party were yet down. Harry was engaged in opening the post-bag, which had just been brought in, and Edith was in the act of making the tea.

“Can I have your brougham to-day, Harry?” she asked, looking up at him over the urn. “I want to drive Lucy over to the Cedars this afternoon.”

“No, Mrs. Neville, you can *not*,” was the answer she received. “I want it myself this afternoon. I have told Masters to bring it over to Salisbury at two o’clock, to fetch me home. I gave you a new barouche of your own last year. Why can’t you leave my brougham alone? you had it again yesterday.”

No one who had seen Edith demurely counting out the ‘spoonfuls of tea one after another, would have guessed at the little throb of delight and triumph which her heart gave as she listened to those

words. She had managed him and his 'naughty pride' pretty well in those ten years, she thought, but she was not going to let him see through her game now.

"Well, if I can't have it, I must do without, I suppose; but you need not be so cross about it, at any rate," she said, giving her head a little toss.

"Oh, I'm cross now, am I?" he exclaimed, looking up at her with glittering eyes. "Take that, then; and that, too, for your impertinence, you undutiful wife!"

As he spoke he threw two letters over to her across the table; which, as he had cleverly calculated, first hit her on the forehead, as she was stooping forward, and then 'cannoned off' on to her breakfast-plate.

"One is from Haughton, I fancy," he added; "and the other looks uncommonly like your Aunt Fanny's fist."

"Thank you, for volunteering information which I knew before," said Edith, coolly. "It *is* my Aunt Fanny's fist, as you rudely observe," she continued, as she opened the

second letter first; "and you will be glad to hear that she reports herself remarkably well this autumn, and much more free from rheumatism than usual. Dear old lady! she says that she and the Hallidays will be delighted to come to us at Christmas, if we really want them."

"All right! then we'll have old Fitzgerald down too, and see if we can't put the finishing touch to that affair of his with Jessie Halliday."

Then Edith proceeded to open and read her other letter, which was, as her husband had suggested, from Haughton.

Before she had travelled half through its closely written pages, she gave a sudden exclamation of surprise and pleasure. "Oh, Harry, here is a piece of news for you!" she cried.

"What's up now?" was that gentleman's irreverent observation, as he looked up for an instant from the newspaper, in which he was already deeply engrossed.

"It's from Laura, read for yourself what

she says," said Edith, going up to her husband, and putting the letter into his hands. She leaned her hand upon his shoulder, and looked over the letter as he read it.

"Little Fan going to be married!" he exclaimed, when he came to the paragraph which had so startled Edith. "Nonsense, that mite! Why, she is about twelve, isn't she? And to Ralph Armitage, too,—your old lover, Edith,—by all that's wonderful!"

Edith blushed, though it was her husband who said it, and she had been married for more than ten years.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she said, enthusiastically, and she looked glad. "This is the one thing that was wanting to make me perfectly happy in this world, now that Kate and Ernest understand each other at last. Dear things, they both look ten years younger since last week."

"You are quite sure you are pleased about this news, Edith?" asked her husband, pulling down her hand.

"Quite sure, dear."

"You are sure you are not sorry now that you did not say yes instead of no, in the Oakley conservatory that day? How foolish you both did look, to be sure!"

"Somebody else looked foolish, too, when he came in and caught us there," she replied, saucily. "I am quite sure, Harry," she added in a graver tone, "that from that hour to this I have never once regretted what I said that day. I could have changed my mind afterwards, you know, if I had felt inclined."

"You would have been Lady Armytage, with forty thousand a year to spend now, if you had," he urged.

"And I shall be Lady Neville some day as it is," she answered proudly; "and that is a 'hundred thousand million times' better, as your eldest son would say. No, Harry! If he had asked me twenty times I should never have married him, because I did not love him. My heart had gone out of my own keeping long before that, as you know well enough, you naughty boy."

“Had it, you dear old woman?” was her husband’s laughing rejoinder. “That last observation demands a kiss of gratitude upon the spot, so there it is. I *say* though, ‘sharp’s the word!’” he exclaimed, looking at his watch the moment after. “It only wants six minutes to the half-hour, and I’ve exactly five minutes and three-quarters left to eat my breakfast in. So make haste there, and give me a cup of tea as fast as you possibly can, ‘Lady Neville that is to be.’”

THE END.









